Omega Point

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/1048277.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Major Character Death
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Freddie Lounds, Beverly Katz, Jimmy Price, Brian Zeller, Dr. Frederick Chilton, Jack Crawford
Additional Tags:	Android AU, AI AU, Mentions of Violence, Sadism, Hand Jobs, Rutting, slow burn story, inexcusable crack, slightly heart-aching angst, we make fun of Chilton, A lot - Freeform, but he deserves it he's an asshole, Freddie is creepy, Very Creepy, You Have Been Warned, sex robots and sex dolls (not Hannibal), and the ethical implications therein, and... eventually... Winston, THIS IS NOT AND WILL NOT BE OMEGA-VERSE
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2013-11-17 Completed: 2013-12-22 Words: 46,497 Chapters: 6/6

Omega Point

by cognomen, whiskeyandspite

Summary

The android had come into Will's possession as a donation, he had never been able to afford one on the money he made, and had only kept him because at the time keeping a regular eating schedule was far more difficult than Will would have admitted. He had gotten him for parts, when the woman had exchanged him for the Alexander model, but hadn't dismantled him as he would have any other. Identical as all the droids were, Will had never found any one of them to be quite like another.

With this particular machine, something had stayed his hand.

Will is an engineer in a world where machines are the norm. He runs a black market part shop, designing his own chips and parts for the assistance robots that are common in the city. He is also the owner of one of the last remaining Hannibal models, no longer in production, which he tests all his new inventions and chips on. Including his latest development, the compassion chip.

Notes

This... is most likely our most favourite piece since Nice Work became a labor of love as it did. This is something we planned and wrote within the space of a week because the idea would not stop and leave us alone. It was initially called something different, but ironically we were beaten to the title by another fic last week.

Regardless, this is an android AU, Hannibal IS an android, Will IS human, there IS vague smut like stuff in there that is the result of a lot of UST (you've been with us a while know you know what to look forward to) and hopefully it's not weird. It's not really. It just kinda... happens where it should. Anyway.

ALSO. This is literally bipolar in its ability to jump from crack that made us giggle grossly at our respective jobs and at ungodly hours of the morning together, to angst that made us cry. You have been warned. Now have fun!!

Chapter 1

Will wakes sore, with the sun sliding hot fingers over his eyes and forcing them closed further. He'd fallen asleep at his desk again, pencil in one hand, an obscure looking bent metal object in another. He isn't even sure what time he'd lost consciousness this time, or what time it was now. He shrugs the blanket hung over his shoulders off and stretches with a loud groan.

His workshop is a flurry of movement as dust settles and resettles in the sunlight, his bed unmade from the morning before when he'd managed to actually sleep in it. he's tempted to resume his efforts at slumber but knows it would not be for the best. He can't remember the last time he'd gotten enough sleep. Years, he supposes, it hardly matters. Not since the Caesar model had hit the market and more and more demands had been made on upgrades.

The new ones always broke the fastest.

Will finds himself busy, often, adjusting settings on older models, fitting upgrades for the newer ones. It's a back alley trade; the models can be upgraded for an awful lot of money at the store, get the latest personality chips, the upgrades to include a different voice recognition software, better optics, more natural movement and fluidity in certain activities. But Will… Will gets the clients who want the same thing for less money. It's how he's always lived, since he'd figured out how to dismantle the very first models and adjust them to his tastes. It had started as a party trick and grown into his livelihood.

No one wants to hire a hands-on engineer when there are machines to do the job for him. He's adapted as the future had.

In the time he isn't working, Will builds chips, slight variations of the things he buys black market for parts, but with better response time, or genuinely human reactions. It's why his shop is so popular. He makes the chips, two of each type for every client, they always differ, tests them and puts one into the androids he's fixing. For a price, of course, as anything. The other he keeps for his own model, his prize resurrection, since the initial model had been so faulty few still existed beyond parts and chips.

It's to him now that he makes his way, gently adjusting the angle of his head from how it had fallen during the night – he'll need to look into a new spring – checking the clarity of the eyes before carefully unplugging the power and covering the space up with clothes. He waits for the initiation sequence to run through, makes sure nothing is behaving like it shouldn't be, and offers a smile when the eyes blink on their own, adjust, focus, and turn to him.

"Good morning, Hannibal."

"Good morning, William." He - it - answers, as the initial diagnostics finish running. When the loose tendon spring is detected, the systems kick in to automatically tighten it enough to keep the programmed humanity more believable, and the motion is masked as a slow stretch of his neck, another blink.

The model was a known hangar queen. At one time they had been produced regularly and were in decent demand - the design had been as a cooking aide, and the production processors had been cheap to keep the cost down. Most of the initial processing power had been occupied with manual dexterity - such was the extent required to keep a smooth chef in operation. It had taken William three or four tries to find a processor that the system would accept that had enough power to run his other priorities and still maintain the dexterity required for the intended purpose.

The result was that Hannibal moved somewhat more slowly than his identical counterparts had, when they had been common. It gave his actions a reserved, meditated feel rather than slow or stunted, and his hands had a grace of their own that he'd never truly wanted to tinker with.

The eyes pass over the room and process in a slow sweep what remains the same. "Did you sleep at your desk again?" He - it - asks, and the mouth makes a small motion, before Hannibal picks himself up, done with system startup checks, and moves smoothly - the walk is something William is proud of. Not that the original had been faulty, exactly, but it had lacked something. The few others of this model still in operation had either been fully internally remodified - much like some made roadsters out of classic car shells by stripping out the internal workings and outfitting them with entirely new systems, or remained steadfastly in uncanny valley.

It had never quite been popular - most had learned to forgo the very first model of anything, and the Alexander cooks of the second generation had a reputation for better stability. Hannibal can cook, however. At that, it excels. The conversation while it does isn't standard, either.

Will rolls his head and stretches his arms over his head until his muscles scream with tension.

“Yes, I slept at my desk again.” he confirms, tone a mixture of amused and irritated. “The Crawfords want both their Caesars adjusted to be able to pass the retinal scan of their front door, I’ve been busy.”

He rubs his eyes and makes another quiet sound before following Hannibal through his workshop.

"A difficult task with acrylic retinas," Hannibal observes, in wry amusement. The apartment is small, to compensate for the overpopulation within the city itself. As expensive as it was, living any further out was prohibitively expensive. Hannibal moves in the space confidently, each exact dimension well stored in his memory and each modification adapted to nearly instantly. So long as he could observe it before he ran into it, he did not need to learn from mistakes - or not as often as he had in the beginning.

The android had come into Will’s possession as a donation, he had never been able to afford one on the money he made, and had only kept him because at the time keeping a regular eating schedule was far more difficult than Will would have admitted. He had gotten him for parts, when the woman had exchanged him for the Alexander model, but hadn’t dismantled him as he would have any other. Identical as all the droids were, Will had never found any one of them to be quite like another.

With this particular machine, something had stayed his hand.

For a while he'd kept him mostly for his intended purpose, expending a lot of effort on keeping his anger in check for when there was a malfunction that caused more cleanup at the shop than Will could afford. Eventually, he'd started using him to test his new chips on, and for three years now, Hannibal has been getting the latest upgrades as the Alexanders and Caesars did.

"What do you want for breakfast?" Hannibal asks, politely. He tended to be business-minded, Will found. At times almost stubborn - he never quite refused to sit still and let Will make adjustments as he needed to his next set of experimental workings, but if he could get Will to sit down and eat before he started working he always would.

He tries, very hard, not to read it as concern. There was a certain difficulty with the domestic assistance line - some people never could quite sympathize with them at all, preferring to either eschew their services or to be certain to treat them only as devices. Others found it impossible not to empathize.

Will had caught himself, at times, rushing to assist when one of his projects struggled with something. They all had some form of adaptive learning for new tasks that might present themselves, but the androids were also coded with hard limits. Legally, as required. When the one issue ran against the other, the newer ones would shift modes, apologize, and retreat to a safe task.

Hannibal - his particular model anyway - had a habit of stopping dead, as if trying his hardest to accomplish what Will required.

"If I say I'm not hungry, you won't believe me," Will replies, scratching his head gently and yawning before shaking his head as though it could shake the exhaustion away so easily. "So anything you can find in the kitchen I suppose."

"If you say you aren't hungry," Hannibal begins, and his tone isn't the usual wrote response - it has managed to warm into a knowing sound. It's a clever trick. "You change your mind by the time I'm done cooking."

He doesn't bother Hannibal as he goes about his usual routine. Will wonders if he has the capacity to be bored. He knows the inner workings of Hannibal better than the machine itself can possibly ever hope to, and he knows he's never put anything in him to support the concept of 'boredom' but regardless, it has always interested him. asking Hannibal would be pointless, he'd get a generic reply, though occasionally he got lucky with sarcasm; a particular linguistic chip Will was still testing before advertising to his current client base.

He does, however, make Hannibal exercise it, to see the true depth of work the chip possesses. He asks questions and expects replies, rephrases them until he can get a decent answer and filter out the words that the android finds confusing. Language is Will's particular passion with his projects, in any time he has spare, he works on creating speech chips that work in the most human way possible. To get responses quick and accurate, seemingly flawless in their communication.

So far, he has found himself stumbling on simple things like jokes. But he still tries.

“Would you want functional retinas?” he asks, regarding Hannibal’s previous comment.

Hannibal has found, from somewhere, eggs and cinnamon and bread that is perhaps two days past fresh, and milk that passes his inspection - he does not need to sniff it, he can tell by a myriad of other sensors that it has not gone bad. He eyes it speculatively anyway, checks the date, and in an action that's entirely unnecessary but standard human, waves the carton beneath his nose as if to detect any hint of sourness.

He looks up, as if to demonstrate that his retinas are perfectly functional. The motion is not usually accompanied by a whirr, but the servos work harder today to compensate for the failure of the spring and the sound is faintly audible. For a moment, he looks almost embarrassed by it, but it is perhaps a trick of the light and the angle. He swings around to finish his preparation of the French toast.

"I have what serves for functional eyesight," he answers, appearing to think about it. A number of processes and thought trees spring to life - first to recall if the question has been asked of him in the past, and any learned behaviors that might have sprung from that. He finds it a unique incident, and the 'thoughtful' hesitation turns a little longer before the path of curiosity wins out over the normal obedient disinterest.

"What would it entail?" he asks at last, mixing the eggs and milk together with a whisk.

Will mentally congratulates himself. Curiosity was something that had taken him a few years to get to the level it was not. Still imperfect, but functional. At the beginning, Hannibal would ask about everything, his curiosity set to that of a young child, but there had never been follow-through, nothing stored in his memory beyond the fact that he had asked the question, he didn’t remember the answer.

Now he was far more subtle.

“It’s a simple transplant, not unlike when I adjust your chips.” He tells him honestly, running a hand through his hair again until the curls stand up on end. He should shower. Perhaps after breakfast.

“Eyes are like fingerprints, they’re unique. The acrylic you have is the same as any of your model, you can’t be identified through it, just the tracking number on the back of the piece itself, but that requires you to be dismantled.” He continues. He’s found that honesty is much easier with Hannibal. And he hasn’t developed any ‘negative emotion’ chips for the droid to feel any indignation at being anything other than what it is.

“Why the Crawfords want their Caesars to be able to pass a retinal scan is beyond me.”

He’s made two sets, as per request order, but he has made another. A habit, now, to make a piece he keeps to put into Hannibal. It had started as testing, now he just enjoys the new upgrades on the model he has in his home. The more he puts into him the easier it is to forget that Will is a lonely, introverted engineer and believe he lives with someone who willingly wants to share space with him and his quirks, late nights and irritable behaviour.

“So, would you want them?” he asks again, to see if his question has given Hannibal a sufficient answer.

Hannibal's expressive eyes blink as he considers, focus still divided between the discussion and the task at hand. He transfers the slices of bread from the wet ingredients, onto a plate of cinnamon, fingers careful to keep it from tearing as he flips it once, and then settles each onto a hot pan. Patient.

He shows no fear at the thought of the process, if he thinks of it at all. Hannibal has always submitted willingly to every change. Unlike a person, he held no true fear of change in himself - there wasn't that innate fear of waking up and finding someone different in their head.

"I'm already unique," he decides at last - and it's an odd response. It seems almost wrote in the tone he gives it, very carefully skirting on self aware. But when he continues it's as if in consideration. Weighing options. Really it's just extended conversation - a natural extension of the careful learning processes. "And I don't suppose I need to pass any retinal scans."

He moves to wash his hands, the toast working away. Three slices, all for will. There was no point in cooking extra for himself. "But I wouldn't mind the upgrade, if it would please you."

Will’s brows rise slightly with the answer, unsure how to take it. A gentle cold spreads in his chest, not panic so much as the onset of it. Androids are not allowed to be free thinking, it’s what separates them from the people who own them. Countless activists have rallied against this law, claiming it’s the resurgence of slavery all over again, that if something is made in the human image it should be treated like a human being.

Will swallows, chews his lip for a moment, watching Hannibal wash his hands, letting his eyes linger on the breakfast cooking and filling the house with delicious sweet smells.

“No, you don’t want it.” he says after a moment, “You have what serves for functional eyesight.”

He waits to see if Hannibal has an answer for this, this which is much more a blatant offer of choice than his initial question had been. That had been loaded with implication, this held none at all. But a lot hung on the answer.

"I don't want. I don't not want." The answer is an old standby. Some old programming that remained from the days when androids were party tricks, and often demanded to explain themselves. Back when people still treated them with curiosity instead of the indifference they gained when they had proven themselves tame and functional at the jobs they were intended for and nothing else. At least they had never grown tired of hearing the same questions, giving the same answer. "So it is enough that you want it. If you do."

After a moment Will lets out a breath and shakes his head.

“There’s three chips waiting as well, I’ll need you to help me solder.”

Hannibal nods, accepting the task as he flips the toast. There is very little waste remaining on the bowls he had used to prepare the food. He is efficient. "I would be pleased to."

With the other side browning in the pan, he washes the dishes involved in the preparation, and then retrieves down a plate. After the pause of several minutes pass, in quiet, Hannibal ticks over into followup, taking up the plate and an empty glass to set them at the table for Will, and looking up as if to see if there was anything else.

"What do the chips do?" he asks, apparently having forgotten all about the subject of new eyes, and retreating to the last offered input.

Will offers a smile for the breakfast and stands up to get a fork from the drawer.

“One is a linguistic adjustment chip, someone wants to change the voice of their Alexander model to match that of an actor who played him once in a film depiction.” He rolls his eyes at the very idea, “It’s simple enough.”

He had, after all, installed such a chip in his Hannibal model, a slight European accent, gentle tones and lilted edges. He isn’t sure why he chose the voice, but it was soothing. Perhaps after he’d tired of the painfully calm generic voice asking him constant questions when he’d been working on the curiosity upgrade.

“One is just a fix on a broken connection,” he waves his hand vaguely, gesturing that it doesn’t really matter, it’s a quick job. He could possibly even get Hannibal to do that one alone, he has the memory of how to fix such things stored already.

Will takes up his fork and cuts a piece of toast at the corner, spearing it and tapping it gently against the plate before lifting it.

“And a compassion chip I’m working on.”

"Difficult," Hannibal observes. His previous conversations have given him a basic understanding of compassion by the dictionary definition, but no ability to comprehend it. No android had that - perhaps none ever really would. They could learn the words and say them, but it was impossible to truly emulate, and as such it seemed to somehow fall short.

And no one had really experimented with it, to be truly fair. It was one thing to develop a more sophisticated nervous system, to teach androids to teach themselves learned behaviors for efficiency, but human emotions weren't useful and, in some ways, skirting illegality.

"Is it for someone?" he asks, as he returns things to their places. Something strains his processor, the conversation and the fine tasks his hands are doing together are perhaps too much, and he takes up the pan before it has cooled. The fine soft plastic skin burns, releasing the smell of degrading chemicals and burnt plastic into the air, and he sets it down suddenly back on the stove. He manages - this time - not to drop it entirely.

His eyes assess the damage - superficial, but in the shallow areas the creases of his articulations create, it has burned through. "I'm sorry," he states simply - in advance of a

warning, perhaps. A learned response delivered in anticipation of having caused himself to require repair.

“Shit,” Will is out of his chair quickly and holding Hannibal’s hand between his own to assess the damage done. It had been instinct, reflex, to go to his as he would for any person, and for a moment it doesn’t register in Will’s mind that there is no blood, that the smell is synthetic and wrong. He gently runs a thumb over the damage. Skin was easy to come by, people picked and chose and rearranged the appearances of their androids frequently. He could possibly even get some today if he left the workshop, but it would set him back a few hours on the retinas.

Will frowns, absently stroking the melted plastic before folding Hannibal’s palm closed gently and pressing the hand back against the android’s chest. He doesn’t ask if he’s alright. He can still differentiate between humanity and its simulation. But he does check him over.

“Can you still move?” he watches Hannibal demonstrate how his wrists still turn well, how his fingers work all the joints, how the palm flexes as it should. The grotesque damage is the only sign that anything is wrong at all, and Will can’t bear to look at it without a strange sort of empathy bubbling to the surface.

"Yes," Hannibal answers. "I can still solder, nothing internal is damaged."

“I’ll fix that,” he assures him, though he doubts Hannibal cares one way or another, in his programming he ‘works’ and that’s all that matters. “I’ll get you a new spring for the –“ he motions to his neck and sighs. For a moment he doesn’t move, then he offers a small smile.

"The left vertebral tendon spring is operating at eighty percent efficiency," Hannibal informs him. "It should serve an additional six weeks without further failure, and after that it may serve longer at sixty percent." It's not - quite - a suggestion that William shouldn't trouble himself. The reports have taken on a slightly different tone than the original diagnostics, managing to sound appreciative and apologetic both.

“What am I going to do with you?”

Hannibal gives the hint of a smile, extends his undamaged hand and touches the back of Will's gently, the ghost of reassurance. The motion wasn't strictly necessary, but it had always seemed to be a part of his programming. "Patiently repair me," he asks - or observes. "But it can wait until after your work for the Crawfords."

Ultimately the decision is William's of course, but Hannibal's opinion was usually unbiased. He had no reason to lie, certainly not pride.

Will allows that if they complete the Crawford's project beforehand, it will allow a little extra sway in his bank account for the new repairs. And a little extra, if he was careful about where he got parts.

"After breakfast," Hannibal suggests, mildly, and William wonders where he had learned to be so subtle.

He eats quickly, attempts to out-fox Hannibal and wash the dishes - unsuccessfully - and returns to his workbench, now flooded in light from the window above it. The city is busy, as it always is, but from the vantage point Will is at he can see above the rooftops of even the highest car and up to the sky. It's not quite summer, but the sun is out much more. It makes it easier to work, less pressure on Will's eyes to have natural light as opposed to the artificial white LED.

He starts on the simple chip, hoping to get it done and out of the way and shipped to the client within the hour. Hannibal helps, carefully working under Will's supervision as he watches his own work through the large magnifying glass at the table. Will jokes that with new eyes Hannibal would not need the thing. He gets a simple statement in return that using a magnifying glass does not hinder him.

With the chip finished, Will starts on the second pair of eyes, one already set aside, ready. It takes him the better part of six hours, and it's only after Hannibal's fourth calm intonation that Will should stop to eat that Will actually does.

"I'm going to need a new pair of eyes after this." he mutters, accepting the gesture Hannibal offers to pull his chair out for him. It's archaic, but Will had not gotten rid of it, there's something very comforting in the gesture.

"It's not as easy to install entirely new optical devices in humans," Hannibal intones mildly. "Better to repair-"

The buzzer at the door cuts him off, and he looks up quickly, as Will scrambles out of his seat again to answer it. It's likely a client. Hannibal makes no protest as Will departs, though he remains in the kitchen to finish cooking dinner.

Jack Crawford waits patiently at the door, and smiles brightly when Will answers it. The expression is almost sharklike on his broad, dark features, but genuine somehow anyway. He has a gap in the center of his top teeth, which he has left uncorrected perhaps as a manner of vanity, and it lends his expression something down home and pleasant. "Will," he says in greeting. "I'm sorry to interrupt your dinner, I was just stopping by on the hope that maybe they were done early...?"

It had been the Crawford's choice not to prioritize one android over the other, but Will knew it left them without house cleaners save themselves. Likely their personal quirks when it came to cleaning - usually seen to by the androids - were slowly driving each other insane. He glances over Will's shoulder, deeper into the apartment, and makes a noise as if remembering something.

"Did you hear they recalled those?"

Will refrains from rolling his eyes. It's a comment a lot of people make, but Jack seems to pride himself on constantly bringing it up, always acting as though he's surprised each time. He steps aside to let the man in.

"One set is finished," he assures him, walking briskly to his workbench to collect the set that lie in the box already, "But the other, I need a few hours more."

He hands the box over, watches Jack give it a cursory curious glance. Jack has been a longtime client of Will's since the Hannibal model was recalled, he has never had trouble with his work. But Will supposes it's human curiosity to look over something, even if it's something they don't understand.

"And this will work?" Jack asks, giving Will an expectant smile. Will's returning one is somewhat flat.

"I haven't had the chance to test them on a scanner, but I see no reason why they shouldn't." he shoves his hands into his pockets and listens to Hannibal shift around in the kitchen behind him. "Did you want to wait for the second pair or would you like me to send them in the morning?" he asks. He already knows the answer. Jack will wait. Not here, perhaps he'll return home, go into the city for a meal, but he will not let Will rest until this work is done. regardless, he waits patiently for the confirmation.

"I'd best wait," Jack says, as if he'd genuinely had to think about it. "Save myself the argument over whether hers gets first priority." Jack smiles, but there are a few days of arguments behind it. "I'm sure it won't be too long."

In the kitchen, Hannibal retrieves something extra from the fridge, shifting seamlessly from making a meal for one to making a meal for two.

"You know they're offering a brand new Alexander in exchange," Jack continues. "I bet whoever tossed it is kicking themselves right now. You ought to turn him in before they change their mind and just turn on all the lockout chips. I guess the government's interested in buying the only part that's still any good - they want that fine motor control for bomb dismantling robots."

Jack chuckles. "Isn't that something? Never put another soldier or peace officer in danger that way."

Will's eyes begin to hurt almost immediately on looking back at the workshop, and the smell of food has made him hungry as it almost always did.

"Stay for dinner," he offers politely, knowing he won't be joining Jack if the man chooses to stay. He directs him further into the house and closes the door before rubbing his eyes and walking past Jack to his workbench. There's a low divider between the bench and the area his kitchen is set, perhaps to keep dust off the food, perhaps just by design. He can see over it well enough to continue conversation that he is fairly sure will be offered, disregarding his preference for silence.

"They always come up with new innovations," he allows as he sits, one leg curled under him as he pulls the magnifying glass close again and takes up the intricate little piece once more. Just one 'eye' left. "No more waste. It's a good idea."

There's a brief silence as Will works the tiny saw to chip away another piece of metal, concentration winning out over politeness. Then he continues.

"I don't need a new Alexander. My model serves me perfectly well and I have no reason to give him up." he blows gently on the piece and reaches over for the final overlay. The outside will be finished soon, once the glue sets, but he still needs to adjust the wiring in the back to make sure the lens opens and closes as it should, and it's this that will take him a long time.

Jack laughs. "Well it seems crazy, but I guess it can't be just you. They're offering not to shut them off if you return the fine motor control unit."

Jack settles himself at the kitchen table, and Hannibal serves him after a time - he's watching Will like the man is fascinated, and doesn't bother thanking the android for dinner. He eats it easily enough however, obviously enjoying it. Hannibal surprises him by interjecting, demonstrating his usual sort of dry humor.

"I'd be less of a cook without my hands," he suggests, tone modulated into wry irony. Jack looks up at him surprised, and then seems to double take at the injured digits, which Hannibal quickly tucks out of sight... ostensibly to see to his next task.

"That's new," Jack observes, without responding directly to Hannibal.

Will's eyes flick up and scan lightly between Jack and Hannibal a few times before simply looking away, as though completely indifferent.

"I test my work before I sell it. There's a reason I've never had complaints." he says, tone neutral. He hadn't missed the loaded silence, however, after Hannibal had spoken and before Jack had replied. He wonders if it had unnerved the man that Hannibal had spoken back, or the way he had. He refrains from asking. He does, however, take the information into stride regarding the ultimatum. One has not been issued to him yet, and he is on record as owning a Hannibal model, so he supposes at one point or another, when the need for the unit is dire, one will present itself.

He pushes the magnifying glass away and carefully lays the 'eye' out to set, adjusting the lamp to shine directly on it, heating the glue and drying it.

"Someone came to you asking for sarcasm?"

"Technically that's general expression," Will points out, "And I've had a few people request custom linguistic chips, yes. I suppose they use them to impress their guests."

"And you?"

Will offers a thin smile, "I test my work." he repeats, wondering if he could steer away from the topic before it hit dangerous territory, "And I adjust it for later upgrades."

In truth, he keeps all his inventions, all his new chips and interesting ideas, in Hannibal because he enjoys his calm and stabilizing company. He likes hearing the android move through his workspace, he enjoys teaching him new things and watching how he adapts them to new situations... in essence Will has redesigned a whole new machine, he's simply kept it in a pre-made shell.

"What else does it do?" Jack asks. Hannibal has managed to settle his timing just so, now that there is a pause while the eye sets, and the new attachments harden, Hannibal delivers his dinner as well. Rather, after learning better of it, he stops at the doorway into Will's workspace holding the plate and waiting either for permission or for Will to come out and eat in the kitchen instead.

"I can juggle," Hannibal offers, blandly. It actually has the intended effect of finally engaging Jack, and as Will comes to stand in the kitchen and take his plate, the space suddenly cramped with three.

"That's a standard feature," Jack observes, "And a pretty lame party trick to boot."

"Can you juggle?" The reply is original, the tone is slightly modulated. Almost impetuous.

"I am not a robot," Jack answers firmly, unaware of Hannibal's victory in getting him to engage in direct conversation at all. The answering smile is a beautiful parody of knowing, though of course Hannibal could not have known - or perhaps even remembered if he had, given his limited memory and priority structuring. The whole expression suggests it was exactly the answer expected.

Jack could possibly be turning red, certainly it was bad for his blood pressure.

"So you've made it infuriating."

Will watches the entire exchange without hiding his smile, spearing his dinner with his fork and chewing slowly as he looks between the two of them. Hannibal stands closer to Will, not enough to shield or crowd, but enough to suggest he's used to such proximity. Will doesn't seem to mind. At Jack's words Will raises an eyebrow, expression still clear and amused.

"I've never offered you linguistic upgrades for a reason, Jack." he says, shrugging at the man's expression, "My job is to modify, in the time I'm not working I modify whatever I get my hands on. There's a lot more to him than his ability to infuriate. There's a reason I don't want an Alexander model, they're frightfully dull."

He nearly inhales his dinner, no chance to savor it regardless of how amazing - as always - it tastes. And refrains from thanking Hannibal as he always does, Jack is already in a foul enough mood to find that particular interaction anything but aggravating. He does pass his plate over to the waiting android with a smile before returning to his workbench.

"I need to check the connections," he tells Jack, already pulling the magnifying glass close again, "It shouldn't take more than an hour." the suggestion is clear: if he wants to stay, he will need to share the space, if he wants to come back, he is more than welcome to go to the door.

"Hannibal, when you're finished I need your hands for the detailing."

"Well that's not bad," Jack says. "I bet I could get these installed and then come back for the other pair, and my wife would hardly have anything to complain about."

He gets to his feet and stretches, giving another glance at Hannibal as the android finishes washing the dishes, apparently having had his fill of company for the evening. Jack does pause at the last part though, glancing into the workspace.

"Say, I guess it's probably pretty good at that isn't it?" Jack makes a thoughtful noise as Hannibal joins Will in the work space, and in his slow, considered way seats himself and waits for instruction. "Shame they're calling them back. I could save a ton on repairs."

"Who would repair your repairman?" Hannibal asks, looking up, placing his hands flat on the table and his tone a perfectly balanced suggestion of dismissal and lighthearted. Jack makes a 'huh' sound instead of laughing.

"On second thought, I'd rather have you do it, Will. But you can keep that sarcasm chip." Jack sees himself out with the box.

Hannibal takes up the tools, and seems curious about Will's laughter, but, with the usual sort of strange wisdom he seems to display, Hannibal doesn't ask.

Will eventually calms himself enough to breathe, rubbing a hand over his face as he keeps smiling.

"You may lose me customers, but I am so proud of that chip." he tells him, turning to give Hannibal a wide smile, watching as the android takes in his expression carefully, measures it, and returns the appropriate smile. It's the process of a few seconds only, but it's enough to allow for the response to not be human, or if human then stunted, someone with bad social skills who needs time to process. His smile gentles and he turns the 'eye' over for Hannibal to inspect through the magnifying glass.

"Those connections there," he says, pointing them out with the side of his little finger, "They need to join up. You have steadier hands than me."

Hannibal checks what Will is indicating, then double-checks, simulating the process in his short term memory storage before he takes up the soldering iron and carefully manipulates the connection into place before he fires the bead of metal to connect them. He waits until the join is created before dividing his attention into speaking.

"I didn't mean to displease Jack," Hannibal suggests at last, looking up. "I'll be quiet around him. Customers are important."

"You didn't displease him, you outwitted him." Will corrects, still smiling, pulling the magnifying glass over to check the connection, "That's not difficult to do. He's unused to people talking back to him, or androids. It's a taste of humble pie, he needed it."

Hannibal tests the join carefully with a tool, and then sits back and puts the iron aside. Surprisingly, he fills the next pause with something that isn't the most recent conversational topic, perhaps salvaging something before the short term memory filters pull out things flagged important for transference to learned behaviors and dumps the rest.

"You could modify an Alexander," Hannibal doesn't quite ask so much as brings up something that had caught on his curiosity. The newer model would have better operating capacity to begin with, would accept newer technology more easily.

Will pauses and looks at Hannibal carefully.

"I could," he agrees, "But I'm happy with you. I don't need an Alexander." he turns back to the 'eye' and mutters as he works, "You could out-do an Alexander in anything its meant to do, the hell would I need one."

He wonders, for a moment, if Hannibal would understand what he means if he tells him he enjoys his company and doesn't want him replaced, or if he'll just take in the words, associate them with emotion and regurgitate a reply.

"I was thinking of putting the compassion chip into you for a trial run." he says, perhaps answering Hannibal's question from breakfast, perhaps just musing aloud, "What do you think?"

"I'm not sure," Hannibal answers honestly. "I've never had compassion. I'd like to try it."

William isn't sure how much of the willingness is genuine, and how much of it is simply the way androids are. He doesn't engage his client's models very often in conversation, and those few he has in order to test out the results and make sure there weren't any conflicts with pre-existing coding in the different models, he has found dull. They are almost universally subservient, save for the occasional client who wanted carefully controlled amusements set into their models.

"Is it alright?" Hannibal asks, breaking into his thoughts. "Not restricted, I mean."

It's an unusual question, not one that Will expected. It has no modulation in the tone, and usually Hannibal doesn't question him at all. It speaks of very old programming, perhaps a model safety routine.

Will sits back, brows furrowed a moment, tapping a thin screwdriver against the side of the workbench.

"I've had a few people ask me for it." he says, "I doubt it's going to bring a smile to developers but it's not illegal." he hopes. He has no idea how much of the emotion he'd managed to instill in the chip. Human emotions were painfully complicated, enough that humans barely understood them. He fiddles with the screwdriver a moment longer before setting it aside and sitting forward to regard the 'eye' again, mentally checking off the things he still needs to adjust before turning it in his hands and initiating the startup for this particular device.

They both watch as the pupil expands and contracts depending on how much light it 'sees', and Will finds himself explaining to Hannibal why a human eye does such a thing, what else pupil dilations and contractions mean. He occasionally talks to Hannibal as he works, about anything. Simply to get it out of his system, or perhaps because as someone who is trapped inside four walls most of his life he would go mad if he didn't.

When he's run through the checks, he shuts the little 'eye' down, setting it into the box with its pair.

"Sure you don't want me to make you some?" he asks, and it's rhetorical, he's already gotten his answer from Hannibal on the matter. And even before he can answer, there's a knock on the door and Will diligently stands to get it, welcoming Jack inside a second time and walking over to take the box from his workbench to pass over.

Hannibal sits quietly while Jack is in the apartment, obedient to his earlier idea of keeping quiet in the man's presence. It seems to please Jack, anyway, or perhaps he has forgotten all about the incident earlier in the pleasure of having a new customization to install in his own models. He pays Will, and leaves a tip - though less than he has on other occasions. It's still enough that Will won't hesitate to take on whatever project the Crawfords next decide to give him.

When Will turns around, Hannibal has risen from the work station, and after a quick glance around the rest of the space he finds the android in the kitchen again, rather than readying for power-down for the evening. It's gotten later than he thought, Will realizes. He'd been at the job longer than anticipated, given Jack's interruption.

Hannibal brings him a cold cut of spongey cake and sugared strawberries - when he'd prepared the components, Will wasn't certain.

"You missed lunch, though this hardly qualifies as a replacement," Hannibal insists - anticipating a protest or an argument that Will doesn't offer. He remembers the damaged skin when Hannibal passes it to him, but it's too late for supplies now. Hannibal arches his eyebrows, and settles himself into an unobtrusive corner of the kitchen, resting at the corner of the counter. Will recognizes the power conservation mechanisms - Hannibal really should have been recharging half an hour ago to keep his battery cells in their best condition.

Will looks at the food a long time before eating it. And this time he savors it, closes his eyes as he eats, lets the flavor melt onto his tongue and into his memory. It's a good end to his day, and he makes a note to wake up earlier the next so he can get what he needs to fix Hannibal's hand and replace the spring. He doesn't let Hannibal do the dishes this time, does them himself and sets them aside before thanking Hannibal and helping him stand.

The newer models can go a few days without a recharge, but Hannibal needs one every 16 hours before he just stops moving. There's a limit to the battery capacity the body can take, so Will hasn't modified it. Watching one power down is similar to how a human being grows steadily more weary. Eyes start drooping, coordination gets shaky. Will guides Hannibal to where he needs to be and sits him down in front of him, one knee on the ground, elbow against his other.

"Thank you for your help." he tells him. It's a usual routine, he'd always been polite to his machines, since he was a child and had any to be polite to, but he has instilled such a thing in Hannibal as well, just as he has systematically installed other human traits in him. "I'll get the skin and spring tomorrow. May need to power you down again before I put them in, but that's up to you."

He smiles at Hannibal's sleepy response and carefully runs his hand down the side and around the back to hibernate him for the evening before plugging in the power.

For a long time he just watches him, lets his eyes sweep over something that looks like a man but has absolutely no organic material to constitute being one. He looks at the way the face rests, soft and realistic save for the fact that he's not breathing, and his eyes don't shift in sleep. Will chews his lip before returning to his workbench and pulling up the compassion chip.

For a few hours he works on it, adjusting certain things, carefully adding others. His hands are shaking by the time he's done, and it's well into the early morning. Regardless, he brings the tall lamp on wheels over to where Hannibal is sitting and carefully bends his head forward to access the panel at the base of his neck. He inserts the chip into one of the last empty slots and makes sure the light comes on indicating it's been accepted before closing the panel up and sitting Hannibal back comfortably again.

Without thinking much on it, Will reaches out to run the backs of his knuckles down the android's face, his thumb touching the corner of his lips before pulling away.

He sleeps in bed this time, and in the morning, he wakes Hannibal as usual.

Chapter 2

Chapter by whiskeyandspite

Chapter Summary

Will can recall what it was like before Hannibal - empty and quiet. For a while, he had struggled to keep strictly legitimate, to do real engineer work, insisting to himself that he was only dabbling on the side. He remembers taking his first robotic assistive device apart - at a party, and finding a mess of wires and fascinating workings inside. From there, he supposes, it hadn't been a very long slide down that slope.

Hannibal had just seemed to come along and cement it, providing him with a valuable testing device when he could have had the android dismantled for parts in a week, a neat profit in his pocket, and the continuing idea that he was only doing it to survive until his real calling came for him.

So maybe, he thinks, as Hannibal sets soup down for him, and carefully provides silverware, they both kind of picked each other up out of the garbage.

Chapter Notes

A lot of exposition and introducing Chilton and Freddie Lounds :)
Fair warning, next chapter is a little... intense.

All comments are welcome and encouraged!

Hannibal rouses slowly this morning, accessing the new addition and dividing his processing power to appropriately integrate it. Briefly, the full list of new additions processes, accesses, integrates. Diagnostics run to be sure nothing conflicts, to resolve prioritization flows, and so instead of his usual single blink, Hannibal wakes slowly with several, and then the tendon spring automatically tightens in his neck to take up the slack, the motion masking as a slow stretch.

Then his eyes meet Will's and he smiles - a slow thing, but almost - just a hair shy of utterly earnest.

"Good morning, William."

He lets the quiet linger for longer than he usually might before attempting to initiate a conversational thread, his eyes moving slightly, taking in Will's posture, his appearance, and then the surroundings. "Final integration processes should complete within half an hour," he assures, a status report.

"I hope you slept well," he intones, after his sweeps reveal the change in the bedclothes, the remainder of work on the table, and then in his slow, considerate way, he gets to his feet. He doesn't - quite- stumble, but he does hesitate at the top of the motion, as if impacted by something. Likely it is internal, a result of the new set of processes trying to find a way to balance with his previous set.

Will holds his hand out, fingers splayed, as though to catch him, but they never touch. He lets his eyes sweep over the droid as Hannibal's had swept the room. Half an hour is a good pace for full integration. It's also a good timeframe for Will to get supplies.

"I did sleep well," he assures him, "Actually in bed today, and not on my desk." his smile is small but genuine. when Hannibal straightens, Will lowers his hands.

"I noticed," Hannibal answers, gentle toned. It sounds approving, interestingly so.

"I need you to wait for the process to complete before you do anything please." Will says, standing on tiptoes to check the eye movement - no hindrance with the new chip, which is good. "No breakfast, no cleaning, nothing."

"You should eat," Hannibal begins, but he doesn't further protest. He meets Will's eyes and nods once. The Androids had, at least, some idea of self-preservation and an even better idea of their capacities. As large investments for the average person, and even the more rich in society, they didn't usually risk themselves unnecessarily.

Will would have left him on standby if he hadn't needed him to be awake for the process to complete.

"I need to pick some things up. When I get back we can walk through the new components together."

"Alright," Hannibal answers, lifting his undamaged hand briefly, to push one of Will's wild curls out of his eyes, before he moves away, only a short distance. He sits to cut some of the processing time, so that nothing needs be devoted to functions other than the integration process.

He does, however, watch Will go, still engaged even though he's been told to sit still and do... more or less nothing. There is always the chance of a counter-order, after all. Hannibal yawns, a human gesture that suggests his internal workings are going much faster than externally revealed, and covers it politely with a fist, and Will hopes he won't find a way to burn anything down in his absence.

He’s perhaps ten floors down in the elevator when the stubborn curl falls in his eyes again and he realizes that Hannibal had set it behind his ear for him. such a gentle gesture, such a practiced one for Will. He spends the rest of the ride down fiddling with the thing, eyes

glazed, wondering if it was a component of Hannibal's ability to mirror or the compassion chip starting to activate.

-

The shops advertise all colors of skin, any shade for hair, replacement acrylics for eyes in unimaginable colors. Will bypasses them all and heads towards the docks, hands in his pockets, mind whirring over the facts and figures, wondering how long it would take Hannibal to adjust to the chip fully, what sort of things would start showing through.

The docks are both the city's open secret and a maze of mystery. Everyone knows you can buy anything at the docks, from components for your droid, to components for yourself. The catch comes in being able to find someone to install those components.

Will is known here, both by dealers and by clients seeking a cheaper alternative to an upgrade. He ignores any calls of his name and heads straight to Price's stall for the skin.

"Hannibal model, right hand, size 11, color B-013." Will tells him, smiling at the way the man raises his eyebrow before stepping back to flip through his files upon files of wares.

"Still on the Hannibal model,"

"He serves me well."

"I'll bet he does."

Will presses his lips together but says nothing more. It takes Price a while to find the size and color Will needs – Hannibal parts are rare now – and they negotiate with playful seriousness on the price. Will leaves with the promise of bringing the man more business. As usual, Price doesn't believe him.

At this time of morning, the docks are bustling. Those who work, as Will does, are out to get their parts for the day's jobs. Those who don't, meander to see what's on offer, or to find themselves someone like Will to fix them what they need. Will has enough work on his plate – and a new paycheck in his pocket – to be able to comfortably avoid customers as he makes his way to Katz and Zeller.

"Well, look who crawled out of his hole to mingle with the commoners," Katz greets, her smile, as always, contagious and wide. "Will Graham."

"I just need parts, Bev."

"Now there's a way to win a girl's attention." She raises an eyebrow as Will shakes his head and lists the details for the parts he needs. When Beverly asks which vertebra specifically he holds up three fingers.

This negotiation for price is harder. Firstly, Beverly is one of the hardest people on the docks. She's incredibly clever, occasionally does what Will does, and manages somehow to work a legitimate job as a programmer on her weekends. Secondly, the parts they're negotiating are antiques, there are perhaps six or seven pieces left to sell at all.

“You need to upgrade, Will,” she tells him as he hands the money over. she counts it quickly, pockets it and bags the little spring for him. “Get an Alexander or something.”

“Don’t need one.”

“They’re recalling the line.” She tells him. Will nods that he knows and salutes her as he turns to leave. He doesn’t ask where Zeller is. Most likely out hunting for more parts for them to sell.

By the time he gets home, more than half an hour has passed, and as expected, when he returns there is the familiar smell of breakfast.

Hannibal looks up at the sound of the door closing, working with the coffee pot as eggs and bacon cook away on the same flat pan he'd burned himself on yesterday.

"Welcome home," he says, and offers a smile as he gets the coffee machine working, slowly hissing and growling to life as it works at percolating the water. The machine is almost as old as Hannibal, and just as reliant.

"I sat still until the processes finished," Hannibal assures him, when Will looks askance. "Then I thought you might like to eat when you got back."

Will sighs, and sets his packaged parts on the work bench, and decides that if the entire place is still in one piece, then he can't be too upset. Stepping into the kitchen, he finds Hannibal watching him, taking in data points from his expression and posture, trying to read mood in his limited way.

"You found everything you needed," Hannibal observes, and he smiles, and turns the bacon. "I'm glad. I know the parts are difficult."

Will studies Hannibal as he’s is being studied, just as curious. The responses are quick and easy, strange to sit on a face usually not quite as expressive. But it’s the voice that gets him the most, it sounds… softer.

“You’re glad?” Will asks, small smile on his face as he goes to lean against the counter next to the android as he works. “How so?”

Hannibal's features work as he considers the question, one that's nearly philosophical given how it challenges him to self-assess. "You weren't exposed to extra stress locating them," Hannibal begins, vaguely evasive. "And you're here in time for the food to be warm. I haven't caused further trouble, and my objective is fulfilled."

Hannibal moves to bring down a plate. "And you're smiling." Hannibal doesn't clarify why that should matter or not, but lays it out like a point that should, as he retrieves the food from the pan onto the plate for Will.

Will just blinks at him, heart beating that little bit faster. It’s almost seamless, the transition with the new chip. The tone of voice has lowered and adjusted accordingly, it’s neutral with that subtle hint of ‘knowing’, that subtle hint of ‘understanding’. It both excites and

absolutely terrifies him. he knows he's on the verge of a breakthrough that will end or make him. he doubts it will be the latter, this is too close to skirting the law.

"Thank you," he says, sitting down as he normally does. But this time when he reaches out to gather cutlery for his breakfast, Hannibal passes it instead. Will takes it in silence, eyes still wide and studying him carefully.

"You're welcome, William," The answer is the standard, delivered in the normal tone, but there's something about it today that feels like a familiar habit, rather than a reinforced response. William can't quite put his finger on it.

"After breakfast I'll put the spring in," he says, "I don't want you suffering for something I can replace quickly. and then we'll do your hand. Do you want to be awake for that?"

"I don't suffer," Hannibal allows, but there's no chastisement in it. William knows he doesn't feel any pain - by the standard definition. Hannibal has a reactive nervous system - he has to, in order to comprehensively interact with the environment around him and to prevent as much damage to himself as possible, though occasionally that function could reduce when his attention was too divided.

Hannibal turns off the stove, and begins the process of cleanup in the kitchen. "It will be easier if I am," he suggests. "I can assist."

Will nods, starting on breakfast as he watches Hannibal clean up the kitchen with precision and care. Although he goes through the motions, says the same things, responds as easily and politely as before, the atmosphere of the apartment has changed. Will no longer feels like he lives there alone. It's as unnerving as it is exciting.

He finds it just as difficult to wash the dishes as he had before the compassion chip, though, and that particular normalcy calms him more than he supposes it should.

He does power Hannibal down for the spring, it's an intricate process and as still as he knows Hannibal will stay, it always unnerves him to know that he's blinking and technically 'conscious' for such a process. It doesn't take more than twenty minutes before he has Hannibal start up again and kneels in front of him as he does every time to watch him come alive.

"Better?" he asks gently.

Hannibal disguises the diagnostic by lifting his own hand to the back of his neck, as if to rub the tension away. He smiles his answer, and then tilts his head and answers with humor. "Exactly twenty percent better," he prefaces his report. "Tendon spring at full efficiency. I'll try to be careful with it."

"Thank you," Hannibal says, straightening. His tone is different than simple politeness - it's pitched into gratitude, with a particular inflection, a certain genuine softness to it. It's with a start that William realizes it's very nearly the same way he thanks Hannibal for meals he has truly enjoyed.

So he does learn. He remembers, he can mimic the inflection; compassion and empathy do make such things easier to do, Will supposes. But it's more than that, and it's that thought that bothers him. he stands as Hannibal does and moves to his workbench, taking out what he needs for the hand and motions for Hannibal to sit as he usually does.

Hands were both simple and tricky. They came pre-shaped – hence sizing – but it was a little more complex than simply slipping it over the hand structure like a glove. It took a lot of adjusting, took careful work to press in the gentle bends of skin as they should be, to wait for the material to fuse as it should. Hannibal would be able to use it but it would be delicate until perhaps the next morning when it had settled completely.

Will presses the lever on his work stool and slides it all the way down, it leaves him sitting lower than Hannibal as he pulls his damaged hand carefully into his lap, one knee drawn up a little higher so he can rest the thing against it. the burn has made a mark very much like a gash, it rends the skin away in the soft center that is the palm in a way that looks genuinely painful. Will glances up at Hannibal.

"Not sure how you'll take this with the new chip, but the initial part isn't pretty." He waits for a confirmation in a nod before reaching over to take up a scalpel from the workbench and get started.

Peeling the skin away is easy enough, but finding a catch to do it at is where it gets intricate. Will gets most of it away, sets the empty shell down on the bench without a second glance and takes the metal skeleton in his hands to check over all connections while he has it so bare.

There's no blood as the skin parts, though it is synthetic and soft and rendered with unusual detail. The eye to color, the careful randomization so as not to seem to repeat inorganically. Each section was detailed and accented, even to the deep layers of the semi-translucent skin. Several freckles come away with the old piece, and the replacement will change their location.

The Hannibal model was renowned – and at its time popular – for the hands. It was made as a chef companion, as someone who could sew, someone who could do intricate things over and over without the problem of cramped muscles and sore shoulders. Perhaps why the government wants them recalled now to use in bomb diffusion. It makes perfect sense, no such work went into the hands with the newer models as did with these. And old technology tended to last longer, battery life aside, than the newer, shinier things.

All connections are in working order, nothing needs adjustment or oiling, nothing is out of place at all. There is some skin material still fused to the palm, where it melted, and Will sits closer to gently pick it away with the edge of his scalpel. It takes time. The bigger pieces come away more or less without issue, but the smaller ones, that have melted into the very bends of the joints in the metal, into the delicate screws and between the sinews… that is what he spends his time on.

Hannibal sits unflinching, calm. Trusting, in a way, Will supposes. He's never done any permanent damage to Hannibal, even though much of his utility revolved around his hands he

had no reason - though perhaps this was attributing far too much humanity - to worry about them when Will was working on them.

He slips into silence as he works, as always, head buzzing with ideas and inventions as he lets his hands work. Hannibal doesn't move, doesn't distract him with speech, and with the new spring no longer makes the barely audible hum when he moves, so Will doesn't pay him much mind at all beyond the hand within his own. Working as he is, it's easy to forget how close to human Hannibal has become.

He sets the edge of the scalpel against a thin metal connector, a tiny thing, and turns Hannibal's hand a little so he can place his own palm directly beside what he's working on for stability. He turns the knife, careful to seek just the material and not damage the metal underneath, and presses just a little too hard. The scalpel slips, the paper-thin edge driving deep into the meat of Will's palm, and he jerks back, letting Hannibal go with a loud yelp of pain.

"Dammit, dammit, dammit," he turns his palm away, tossing the scalpel to the table. If he got blood anywhere near the metal it would be a disaster.

Hannibal jumps, and gives every appearance of surprise though Will knows it was just a failed attempt to stop the injury from happening. The android is already reaching for Will's hands, nearly as instinctively as Will had reached for his, but when Will draws them further away - for just a second, Hannibal seems hurt, then logic kicks in and he turns his hands palm-out in a stay-still motion, getting up.

"I'll get the first aid kit," Hannibal volunteers, and then continues to advise. "Keep pressure on it."
As he passes, he touches Will's shoulder, reassuring, with his undamaged hand. The kit is in the bathroom - wisely out of the way in the small space, but always well stocked with enough to take care of the sort of minor injuries that were very common in small repairs such as Will made.

"Are you alright?" he asks as he returns, watching Will nurse the injured hand against his mouth as Hannibal snaps the kit open and delicately retrieves the antiseptic and liquid sutures - stemming Will's protests ahead of time by keeping the unskinned hand still and immobile at his side.

Will nods. It's a deep cut but not a large one, so it will bleed but it isn't irreparable damage. He can still work with it, which is a relief. He lets his eyes settle, instead, on the way Hannibal's brows have furrowed, the way he's carefully selecting what they'll need with his left hand, just as smoothly and gracefully as he would with his right - all models are programmed ambidextrous. He only stops sucking on the cut when Hannibal holds out the little bottle of antiseptic and a cotton bud.

It doesn't take long to clean the cut, nor to seal it. And afterwards Will sits for a long time cradling it from habit, an instinct to want to hold something that's hurting closer to yourself. Hannibal returns the kit to the bathroom before settling in his seat again, head ducked just a little, tilted, and watching Will carefully.

After a moment, Will holds his hand out, clean, for Hannibal to inspect as he had wanted to do before. He waits for him to take it.

"You reached for me before," he says, "Why?"

Hannibal curls his intact fingers beneath the back of Will's palm and leans closer - it's not a strictly necessary step, he can refocus his vision to magnify from any distance but it's another one of those behaviors that Will had gently suggested into his coding. His touch is extremely gentle, fingertips cool against Will's skin.

He looks up at the question, but he doesn't seem to have a solid answer. He reviews his action list, goes back down his priority trees. "I wanted to be certain it wasn't very serious," he answers at last. And then he displays his own stripped palm. "It seemed like the correct action."

Hannibal folds Will's fingers gently back, as best he can one handed, and pushes it back toward Will's chest , but he doesn't pull his hand away again as Will had. He repeats, "What am I going to do with you?" Hannibal seems to consider that explanation enough - or perhaps the best way he can explain it without trying to rely on words that should only be applied to humans, such as 'worry' or 'concern'. Will wonders if it's difficult for Hannibal to come to terms with the notion, even only in a simulated fashion as this must be.

"You can finish later," he offers. "I'm not inconvenienced; you are."

Will's smile is a strange mix of helpless and pleased. He shakes his head gently and pulls his hand away to flex his fingers. They move fine, occasionally his palm feels stretched but not enough to hinder his work.

"I'll finish it, it will need the day to set." he holds his hand out until Hannibal gives him his own, and pulls the magnifying glass over to see if he missed anything. Besides the sliver he'd been attempting to carve away, Will has managed to clean the mechanism perfectly. He thinks that perhaps the stuff left won't hinder Hannibal much in his movements.

He slips the skin-glove over Hannibal's hand and starts adjusting it from the fingers. it's a slow process but not a taxing one, as though giving someone a hand massage. He presses gently against the fingertips, one after the other, then to the joint below and on down to the palm itself. It has always really impressed Will how very similar the material is to genuine human skin. It's soft and slightly papery, not overly dry. The range of colors is spectacular, with light blue lines running below the surface layer to imitate veins.

Hannibal obediently stretches and twists as Will makes adjustments, informing him when the stretch feels wrong - either too tight, or too lose. It's helpful - just as Hannibal had suggested he would be. It helps to get all the adjustments done now, rather than having to tighten or loosen as Hannibal used it, and it minimized the chance of tearing or catching in something.

By the time he reaches Hannibal's palm, his fingers are flexing inwards, gently touching the back of Will's thumb as he works. He isn't sure if it's reflex or because Hannibal feels, again, that it's the 'correct action'. He doesn't linger on the thought.

He's just reaching his wrist, already warming the glue to reattach it seamlessly to the skin of Hannibal's forearm, when the little glass sliver in his pocket vibrates with a call. He makes an annoyed sound, gives Hannibal an apologetic look, and reaches back to pull the cellphone out. the photograph on the screen is not one he recognizes, but this is his work line so that's not uncommon. He answers left handed, right hand still holding Hannibal's gently, thumb pressing the skin down from the base of Hannibal's fingers and down the soft center of his palm so it doesn't peel back as he talks.

He doesn't notice how intimate the gesture actually is until Hannibal's fingers curl over his again. Then he just watches him, watches as the android carefully presses his fingertips against him, watches the movement, before glancing up to watch Will's response. He doesn't outwardly give one. Inside, his heart rate speeds up a little.

"Is this Will Graham?" The tone on the other end of the line is trying for cultured, but it only calls attention to the harsher tones hiding beneath - they speak of a successful man trying to crush his past under evidence of his current success. When Will affirms, the man continues.

"I was referred to you by a friend who said you specialized in android linguistic modification," the man suggests, trying for delicacy. Hannibal's fingers trace along the pulse line on the underside of Will's wrist in slow lines, his eyes directed downward to watch the motion. "I have an import that I received... recently. I was wondering if you would be able to install an English language function, and make that the default."

Hannibal's eyebrows are drawing in slowly as he seems to consider the input. Certainly he can touch and experience his world, but he seems somewhat lost in the sensory data - perhaps something has changed about the input with the new skin, or there is some new connection trying to put itself together with the new set of programmed behaviors. Will can't ask quite yet.

"What does it speak now?" he asks, expecting the answer.

"Korean."

Will's lips work not to smile and he fails. He takes a moment to compose himself before he speaks, the smile would be heard.

"That shouldn't be a problem. I've worked with that language before, recalibrating your model shouldn't take more than a few hours." he lets his eyes slide to his hand in Hannibal's then up, slowly, to study his face as his fingers gently press against Will's wrist and around the muscles there. He swallows and looks up, eyes trained on the ceiling as Hannibal's knuckles brush his thigh with another gentle turn. It's distracting.

"I assume it's a Sybian?" there's a brief clearing of throat over the line and Will huffs an amused breath through his nose. Of course it's a Sybian. Korea is notorious for them. They have their own versions of Caesars and Alexanders, but it's far too expensive to have those sent in, especially when the models here are just as good. Sybians, however...

"They have a very primative linguistic ability, in any language, did you want that revised or simply adjusted?"

"Just... an adjustment should be fine." the man sighs and Will can hear him move around his apartment - or hotel room, as is more likely - as he himself shifts his hand, and Hannibal's with it away from his thigh and up to rest by his knee instead.

"If you would like to bring it by, I have a slot free from 2pm. I'll send you the details. Is that doable for you?"

Hannibal seems to have realized, by the way Will moves his hand, that he's distracting. His fingers cease their motion, and he looks up instead, waiting patiently for Will to finish his phone call with fingers curled up only loosely beneath Will's wrist. He does not so much as simulate breathing.

On the other end of the line there's a brief shuffling of papers. "Yes, I can make that work. What do you need me to bring you? Do you need the whole thing, or can I disengage the..."

The man struggles for the technical term. Many newer models had a designated modification box that could be pulled and have interchangeable, approved modules swapped into it. It was akin to changing the disc in an old digital movie player, when those had still been a necessity. It was basic and sloppy, but it gave people the feeling of more control over their models.

"The whole unit please," Will answers - he'll bypass the whole modbox system and make the changes at ground level. They integrated more smoothly that way.

"And you'll send the information?"

"Immediately following the call." Will confirms, he can send it during, the phone has that capability, but he prefers not to. Not when one of his hands is occupied.

"Right. Uh... and the price?"

Will negotiates for a few moments, confirming exactly what the man wants done, how new the model is. He gives him an estimate, gets agreement in response, and finishes the call, turning his hand to check his watch as he sends his standard information message to the number the man had called from. Then he sets the glass down and returns to working on Hannibal's hand.

His own had warmed the palm enough for the material to set better than it would have otherwise and he smiles.

"May need your help soldering today." he tells him, picking up the glue and smoothing the skin down over the existing line against Hannibal's forearm. The glue softens the material down, lays it seamlessly over the preexisting skin. "Linguistic chip, easy money."

"Good news," Hannibal agrees, before observing, "You asked more than you usually do."

He runs his fingers over the line where skin joins skin, much like Hannibal's fingers had caressed his own hand, until the glue has set. Then Will pulls his hands away.

"How does it feel?"

Hannibal lifts his hand under his own power and turns it slowly at the wrist - not so fast as to stress the new join, but enough to feel if his motion will be limited - it moves clean. He bends his palm, and it creases along the life, heart, and fate lines cleverly replicated there. Will notices a new freckle along the side of his hand as he tests the curl and flex of each finger individually and then together.

"Optimal," he answers, and then seems trapped rubbing the pad of his palm in a line over his fingertips, running some kind of test or gathering data. "Something is different today. The processes for compassion has restructured something."

It's almost a question, and Hannibal looks up to see if William will further explain it. The changes had been pleasing to this point, Hannibal had seemed to pull them in and make them a part of himself, working them together with the old additions that William was proud of.

Will considers a moment. "Could be you're learning to associate certain physical feelings with their conceptual equivalents." he tells him finally. He won't be able to explain emotions to an android; humans barely understood them. He still doesn't address Hannibal's question regarding price.

In the time he's had Hannibal, Will has fixed his fair share of models: Hannibals when they were popular, or even around, Alexanders, Caesars, quite a decent handful of Sybians. He's fairly sure if he made Hannibal think back enough there would be information stored regarding that model, but he's also adjusted Hannibal's memory chip to systematically clear information that isn't relevant to his everyday existence.

"Sybian models require very little linguistic ability." he says instead, "It will be a simple adjustment and reset."

Not something he'll need to make two of to test on his own model. Another thought crosses his mind regarding testing and he looks away before the color in his cheeks can be associated with anything in Hannibal's logical mind.

Hannibal finds, as he almost always does, the very worst time for the simplest form of his curiosity. "Why?" He is still touching his fingertips with his thumb, and then he briefly, gently steeples his fingers together, before he finds a way to even out sensation between both sets of digits in his mind and he rises to his feet.

"There's a couple of hours before it arrives though, did you want to explore your new chip at all? Or just let the adjustments work themselves out?" Will stands and rolls his shoulders, "Is anything malfunctioning or hindering your ability to process?"

Hannibal considers the offer, and then tilts his head. "What exercise do you suggest?" he asks, engaged. "I haven't had any priority conflicts with the other installations. I have no spare processing power at current. I may have to close down a function if anything motor intensive is required of me, but it seems the priority lists are in place."

The android falsifies a deep breath, synthesizes the sound of letting it out - there aren't, of course, any lungs in his chest. No air moves. "I find sensation more compelling."

Will nods. As with every new adjustment, Hannibal has adapted very quickly. It's rare that Will has to talk him through a process or actually work through an exercise to get a new function working. Another reason he refuses to give Hannibal up for an upgrade; he honestly doesn't need one. Society has become obsessed with owning the latest and prettiest, and tossing aside anything 'lesser' regardless of its continued functioning and ability to both work and process just as much information, if a little slower.

"You will have a lot of new data to process, but after a few days that will pass. You will assimilate the information like you did with the curiosity chip." Will's lips press together, "Though you still slip." this regarding the innocent question he'd chosen to ignore earlier.

"Curiosity is hard to gauge," Hannibal answers smoothly. "Sarcasm has better results."

"Sybians have no need for a vast vocabulary, they are helpers for a very primitive need. In essence they have a very basic processor." their language capabilities excel in wordless sounds of any and all volumes and tones, and fall short on anything particularly useful. Holding a conversation with a Sybian unless one is post coital is a rather dull affair or an exercise in patience.

Hannibal nods, accepting the information, digging back far enough to find the reference point in his memory files before he asks further questions on the subject. A very primitive need, and it suggested that functionally, their owners did not require much of them, conversationally.

Hannibal intuits an odd connection, but it's not entirely an invalid one. "Is that why the Crawfords haven't upgraded the linguistic centers on 536 and 567?"

Well, they certainly weren't much interested in conversation with their cleaning units, but Will knows it isn't for the same reason. Hannibal doesn't seem to need an answer, instead moving smoothly to start packing up the area - light work that will not damage the setting fixative on his hand - and ready it for the next project.

"I would cook lunch for you," he offers, settling stubbornly into the rut of his intended purpose again. "If you'll let me."

Will makes a gesture suggesting Hannibal help himself if the routine makes the transition easier. Again Will wonders if Hannibal has the capacity to be bored, not just know what the idea of boredom is. He supposes in a way it doesn't matter. He was an android made to work with his hands, as a chef's aide, and he's simply following old programming. Will lets him. Tells him he's going to take a shower and leaves him in the kitchen.

By the time he comes out, the entire apartment smells good. He tosses his towel aside, over the back of a chair where it can dry even a little, and returns to the kitchen where Hannibal is still stirring something, still busy.

"Your phone rang," Hannibal reveals. Will glances at it on the table, showing one call received, and leaves it for later. The image suggested it was an old customer - Freddie Lounds - and she could wait.

"Is your hand alright?" Hannibal asks next, recalling back fairly far for a reference point. Will smiles a little - even though his hand aches. That's compassion, he's fairly certain. He vaguely wonders how Jack would feel to have so much consideration from his set of machines. He doubts it would be as welcome as it was here, where it seemed to fill the space a little more.

Will can recall what it was like before Hannibal - empty and quiet. For a while, he had struggled to keep strictly legitimate, to do real engineer work, insisting to himself that he was only dabbling on the side. He remembers taking his first robotic assistive device apart - at a party, and finding a mess of wires and fascinating workings inside. From there, he supposes, it hadn't been a very long slide down that slope.

Hannibal had just seemed to come along and cement it, providing him with a valuable testing device when he could have had the android dismantled for parts in a week, a neat profit in his pocket, and the continuing idea that he was only doing it to survive until his real calling came for him.

So maybe, he thinks, as Hannibal sets soup down for him, and carefully provides silverware, they both kind of picked each other up out of the garbage. It sounds more pathetic in his mind when he allows it to run out in a line like that.

"It's good," he tells Hannibal, finds the answering smile oddly thankful for the compliment, and wonders if Hannibal is ever curious about his own cooking. Probably not, he wasn't remotely equipped to eat. "Thank you."

-

At two, the client - who introduces himself only by his last name, 'Chilton', arrives, with a soft, fairly generic faced robot. It is a mid-range model with minimal extra features, Will notes. He is surprised to find that it's male, but he keeps the response to himself. Perhaps he can count on repeat business if Mr. Chilton is pleased with the language restructuring, but finds the rest of the performance canned and lackluster.

Will only knows secondhand, but it had only taken a very short time for personal assistance androids to come down this road. Chilton looks fairly embarrassed as he ushers the Sybian in, in a long dark trench coat.

"I can't get it to change into anything more appropriate," he says, as if daring Will to comment. He isn't entirely sure he wants to find out what's beneath the coat - but it reveals itself to be a nurse outfit, complete with a skirt.

Will presses his teeth against his top lip hard, the smile evident but restraining himself enough not to laugh. He's actually seen worse. He hopes very much Hannibal decides to hold his tongue for the moment and only asks questions after the client has left. Not a discussion Will wants to have at all, but at least it will spare him a loss of a potential client.

Will doesn't take up the challenge to comment. Instead, he steps close enough to test the responsiveness of the android being able to follow his movements, and in very broken Korean asks it what it wants. What he gets in response is a tirade of Korean he can't seem to put an end to, and for a while he just lets it go on, a strange mix of harsh nasally sounds

interspersed with little needy moans. He patiently catches the model's hands when it moves to touch him and holds them at bay.

Hannibal appears at the odd sounds, utterly unusual in the space, and comes to a stop at the low dividing counter that separates the small, efficient kitchen from the rest of the apartment. His hands settle flat on the counter in mirror to each other. There is likely some conflict attempting to resolve itself between the newer functions and his old ones. It keeps him quiet for the moment, a fact that Will thanks his unexpectedly lucky stars for.

Will gives Chilton a look that suggests he's seen this problem before, and that it's usually a user-made one rather than a defect in the model. He reaches around to set the android to hibernate and extricates himself from the grip.

"Response functions seem normal," he tells him, tone almost bored, "None of that will need to be adjusted. Strength level is fairly low, did you want that raised for struggle."

His smile is smooth and the question is specifically to watch his customer squirm. Will can't help it, he judges most of the people who purchase a Sybian. So much money for such a basic need.

Chilton's mortified look fades when he turns his attention toward the second presence and finds it to only be Hannibal. Something fades out of the man then, the worry at being judged. In his eyes the suspicion of conspiracy raises up, and when he looks at Will again, he slides his hands into his pockets casually, and brings the man down to his level in his own mind. Will feels slimy in his own skin for a moment, before he remembers that Hannibal, old as the model is, is far more sophisticated.

Eventually he receives a negative reply and inclines his head. "Just language then. Standard English chip or would you like other languages installed?"

"Why didn't you get an American model?" Hannibal interjects at last. There is technically no American model of Sybian. A company had tried, and quickly failed due to scandal and outraged moral crusaders. It didn't stop the modifications from being widely available and often performed.

Chilton gives Hannibal a strange look, as if disbelieving, and addresses his answer to Will. "Because, as you already know, modifying them can get expensive. I figured for just a little more than having all the work done, I could have a whole new system. They advertised that it spoke English, they didn't say that it was so broken it barely mattered."

Chilton rocks from his heels to his toes, an aggressively nervous gesture that gives him another few inches of height on Will for a moment, before the motion completes and he settles back onto the flats of his feet. "Look, just install functional English. I need it to be able to put clothes on for company. As it is I had to turn it off and close it in the bathroom because it can't understand simple commands."

After a moment, Chilton gives in, accepting Will's silence as maybe a sort of conspiratorial camaraderie. "Unless there was anything you'd really recommend?"

Will just shrugs. "If you pay for the parts I can install anything you like." and it's true, once Will starts working it really doesn't matter to him what he's installing or where. In fact, unless it directly involves Hannibal, Will doesn't much care for the fate or use of the androids he works on. It would be too much of an energy expense he can't afford; he works too much, for better or worse.

"The language chip I can do today, I have a few spare. Anything else would have to be another time." he moves away to lean over his workbench to get to the drawers by the window containing all his chips and pieces he works with.

"I can adjust his movement, his level of responsiveness, ability to talk back," he smiles thinly and grabs a screwdriver before returning, "Any physical components you weren't pleased with."

He raises his eyebrows before concentrating on the task at hand. Installing the chip is never a problem, it's testing its functionality where it becomes both amusing and occasionally problematic. In this case, it was mostly the former. By the time he's adjusted the comprehension level to accept commands properly he's laughing helplessly at the responses he's gotten, no longer caring if Chilton is unamused or hiding his own smile.

He tells the android to retrieve the coat and dress itself, and once the command is followed without a hitch he gives Chilton another smile, this one genuine.

"The chip has a four year guarantee on it, anything wrong with it that wasn't explicitly caused by you I can fix free of charge." he directs the Sybian to return to its actual master and folds his arms over his chest as he regards the man with a neutral look.

"If I were you, I'd make another appointment now, my weeks fill up."

When the Sybian retrieves the coat and puts it on, then blinks up at Chilton expectantly, waiting for an order, the man is visibly relieved. And clearly pleased.

"I'll go ahead and set up a followup," he agrees, somewhat distractedly. His eyes wander to Hannibal again, who had watched the entire process from out of the way, always interested in Will's work, and then they skirt away. "I can always cancel if it turns out I don't need it. Why not in a week or so - any problems will likely be clear by then."

Will sets an appointment for him, and then endures the moment where Chilton looks as if he's about to outright ask, before he finally lets it go, deciding he doesn't need to know and is better off not opening himself up to return questions. He pays Will the requested fee, but does not tip - Will understands it to be a quirk of being a first time owner rather than a deliberate sleight, but it still stings a little. He hopes Chilton will research a little more on the protocols of black market android components and the installation of under the table modifications before he next appears at his appointment.

When he collects his Sybian and leaves, Will settles back in his seat and laughs a little, just to let the tension out. Hannibal doesn't seem to have anything to say yet, but he has an expression as if something will shortly come up. It will either be amusing or mortifying, and

it's honestly interesting to see which turns up. The flashing light on his glass distracts him after a moment, and he takes it up to return Freddie's call.

Freddie Lounds is a woman of great cleverness. She's an adaptable personality, extroverted, calm, analytical and calculating. She's attractive and dangerous; above all dangerous. And it's with a silken tone that she answers her phone when Will Graham calls her back.

"Mr. Graham," she smiles, the warmth transferring to her voice, "I had quite the conversation with your secretary."

Will smiles in turn, still riding the high of his amusement after Chilton. "I'm sure. How can I help you, Miss Lounds? Another encrypted memory chip?"

Will remembers the appointment well, had allowed the young woman to convince herself she was fooling him into believing it really had been her own chip she had forgotten the encryption to. But they were creatures of the underbelly, they swallowed deception like air. He hadn't asked, she hadn't told. Her tip had spoken for her.

"A Hannibal model, if I recall," Freddie continues, seemingly ignoring Will's comment, "You know, you could get so much money for him."

"I make my own money," Will replies, smile still on his face but no longer quite as genuine. "I doubt you called for him. what can I do for you?"

"The government is recalling all the Hannibal models," Freddie nearly purrs into the phone, "Something to do with the dexterity mechanism. Bomb dismantling."

"I heard."

"They would offer you a replacement," she says, "An Alexander model perhaps, if yours is one of the last, maybe even a Caesar."

"It never occurred to me that you work for the government, Miss Lounds." Will replies carefully. He could be in a lot of trouble if she did, but, that said, if she did work for the government he would not be getting a courtesy call.

"Oh goodness," Freddie fades back a little from her direct approach, trying a new tack. Will could almost imagine her sitting back suddenly and gently fanning herself - like an overwhelmed southern belle. Her smile would be pleased, however. "The government? Me?"

Her tone is so perfectly aligned into false surprise that Will has to believe it's still a possibility. He doubts, however, that it's in any official capacity.

"You didn't call me to tell me about the recall," he reminds.

"I suppose I didn't," she allows, her tone sliding down into a dangerous sort of playful. "Mr. Graham I seem to have locked myself out of a memory bank again. I don't suppose you'd be willing to help me out? You did such a fantastic job last time, and I'd be more than grateful."

The choice isn't truly difficult, but William knows he should probably shut her out now, before this becomes a habit. She was up to something, that was for certain, but Will couldn't quite put it together. He resolves that next time he'll say no. Two jobs wasn't a habit. Yet. He does take advantage of his position to extract a little more information.

"So I suppose you'll be bringing in the box from your Caesar again? It could be I could help your encryption problem if you'd bring me the whole unit..." Will asks. He's fishing for information, and Freddie knows it. She chuckles.

"Oh no, Mr. Graham. I have a real treat. I've upgraded, you know. Have you ever worked on a Napoleon before? Well, I bet you can figure it out just fine. I'll bring the box by tomorrow morning."

Will lets her hang up first and looks at his phone a long time before setting it aside. Napoleons, if gossip at the docks was to be believed, were not yet available to the general public. They had a small release of 100 models for final testing, and boasted a return to the dexterity of the Hannibal models, if not to the same extent. Turning the barrel over to see if the old stuff could be passed off as new again.

“Another appointment tomorrow morning.” He tells Hannibal, brows still furrowed in thought. Something about her request did not sit right with him. but in theory nothing should, in Will’s line of work, so he shakes his head and makes himself forget about it for the moment.

The rest of the day passes slowly, Will starting on a new chip just to have something to do with his hands, though he takes longer rest breaks to avoid putting too much pressure on his injury. Hannibal moves around the space as he always does, given free reign as he often is to do as he likes as Will has no need of him.

Will does observe that he takes his time to walk the space again, to move around the apartment and touch things, linger. It’s fascinating to watch, and Will finds himself in that strange headspace again where he isn’t sure if he’s proud of his creation or scared of how far he’s pushed it.

By evening – after dinner, of course – Will retires early, crawling into bed face first and wishing Hannibal a good night as he always does. He’ll set himself to recharge once he’s finished whatever his programming claims he needs to do – dishes, setting those away, general clean up – and by morning will be filled with new information and, perhaps, questions.

Sleep comes blessedly quick for once, ideas not crowding Will's space for attention, details he'd passed over during the day don't rise to haunt him. Will closes his eyes, and sleeps faster than he recalls doing in a long time, lulled by the sounds of Hannibal moving quietly around the space.

When he wakes again the apartment is fully dark. He isn't certain how much time has passed, but there is the sensation of cool fingers brushing against his cheek, and it takes him a moment to realize he isn't dreaming. Another further to wake enough to realize the shadow

sitting above him on the bed is Hannibal, moving slowly and with the economy of his model running low on charge.

The shape shifts, and a body settles into the bed next to Will, close enough to touch most of him, and for a moment he has nothing to really say, as Hannibal curls his cool fingers around Will's hands where they lay curled in front of him. He brings both up toward his mouth, and presses the backs of Will's knuckles against it, unknowingly echoing the touch of the night past.

"I'm sorry I can't help you in all the ways other models can," Hannibal tells him, in the darkness. He has never woken Will like this, never settled so close for anything other than practical reasons, never initiated contact to this level. Will's heart beats faster. He can feel Hannibal's simulated breathing, slow, transferring through the mattress.

He swallows, eyes used enough to the darkness to make out Hannibal’s features, as close as they are. His eyes move over Will’s face carefully, before settling on Will’s own and he blinks. His hands are still holding Will’s gently, just between them.

“I don’t need you to.” He tells him, and for a moment he wonders if that’s true. Will has never had the desire to manipulate Hannibal for anything but his design, when he installs a new component into his android he makes sure it works alongside the mechanics already there, he has never altered him to be anything but what he’s meant to be; he’s just given him the ability to express himself better.

But it’s almost a forgiveness, assuring Hannibal that his inability to perform certain functions – were they wanted or not – is not his fault, nor should he think so. Will can adjust him for such things but he refuses to exploit him. it’s not as though the thought had never crossed his mind, Will isn’t blind, and he is lonely.

"Will they dismantle me?" Hannibal asks, and it's curiosity and compassion both, and together they sound alarmingly like fear. Hannibal has no ideas of total self-preservation - he has always been careful to prevent damage, but he never would have resisted the idea of being taken down to parts, if that's what Will had decided to do. After a moment, he reveals the source of worry is not... totally, at least, for himself. "Will you be alone?"

“They have no right to dismantle you without my permission.” Will replies quietly, “And permission is something I won’t give them.” Just as he hasn’t for the years he’s had Hannibal, for the years people have asked for him as a collectable, for parts, for themselves since they couldn’t afford a better model. He has calmly directed them elsewhere, and kept Hannibal as his own.

He doesn’t address the last words, unsure if his heart is beating faster now because of the way they sounded or because Hannibal had thought to ask. Both tug a little at a part of himself Will chooses to keep closed away, an empathy for things that can’t feel back.

“You need to charge,” he tells him, not an outright dismissal but a gentle letting down. He has no idea if things would have progressed had he not woken up, had he attempted to reciprocate. He doesn’t want to think about that now, not when they’re still too close. He

pulls his hands from Hannibal's and slides out of bed, waiting for Hannibal to get up himself and obediently follow him to where he charges.

Will makes sure he's settled, lets his hand linger against Hannibal's previously damaged one as though to check how it's set. He wishes him good night, as always, shuts him down and sets him to charge. He tries not to linger on the sound of Hannibal's voice, low, almost tired, as he'd wished Will a pleasant night in turn, he tries not to linger on the memory of the feeling of him lying so close, touching him as though he was discovering him.

Will lifts his fingers to run the backs of his knuckles gently over Hannibal's face and down his neck, return to press the flat of his thumb lightly against his lips before shaking his head and stepping away.

"Stupid." He tells himself, returning to bed and curling up under the blankets, irritated and confused. It takes him a long time to fall asleep.

Chapter 3

Chapter by whiskeyandspite

Chapter Summary

"Isn't it just amazing what they do these days? You really should upgrade," she says, and then into the stony silence. "No, I mean really. You asked me yesterday if I worked for the government, Mr. Graham. And the answer is... not always, but sometimes certainly. I'm a Repossession Agent, Mr. Graham."

Freddie visits Will and gives him some... friendly advice. Fair warning, the chapter is pretty intense.

Chapter Notes

Some serious kudos to cognomen, guys, please. He created the most stunning monster that is Freddie Lounds in this verse and I cannot get over how well he did it.

Freddie Lounds seems almost bigger than Will Graham's apartment can hold. He remembers the effect had been the same the first time she showed up too. She arrives immaculately dressed with an unfamiliar memory unit held in her pale, perfectly manicured hands. The nail polish, Will notices, is perhaps one shade of red off of her carefully styled curls, and it stands out vividly against the pale machine grey of the drive.

"Good Morning," she greets, and smiles in a bright, impish way, passing the device over to Will. "I understand if this takes you a little longer than last time. Unless you've seen one of these before?"

She sounds like she wouldn't be surprised. Will allows that some people barely got new things out of the box before they wanted them changed or customized. He allows that it is the first Napoleon part he's had the pleasure of working on, and she smiles, clearly pleased to have taken his first on something. She's the sort who keeps tallies on that kind of thing.

"I'll just wait, if you don't mind," she says, pleasantly, her tone suggesting that if he wants the job he had better not mind. "I'll feel more comfortable if I can keep my *eyes* on it, you know. Some people would pay a lot for a drive like that. Not that I don't trust you, Mr. Graham."

"By all means," Will says, though the thought sets him on edge. "Wait, if you like. There's not many places to sit."

"Oh, I can stand," Freddie answers airily, making her way deeper into the apartment, clearly on the lookout until she spies Hannibal in the small kitchen.

"Oh and look at *you*," she coos, making herself at home as Will settles in with the device to get it plugged into the reading device. Her voice emerges from the kitchen next, and Will looks up to see her with her hands on Hannibal's face, tilting him this way and that as if he were a hands on museum exhibit. "Aren't you just the smoothest thing. You know, I worked with a few of these when they were new - ah, I was such a young lady then, don't look like that. They were all just the jerkiest things at times. Awkward. Ah and he's so cool - I forgot they didn't warm the skin then. I guess it barely mattered."

She steps back, clucking her tongue. "That's a lot of work in there, I'll bet, Mr. Graham. Oh no - don't let me distract you, I'm just thinking out loud. Silly me. I'll get my answers from your Hannibal, here."

Will plugs the drive in, clicks it on, accesses the file information. For the size of it, it's a massive amount of memory. The possibility for what sort of capabilities a machine with that capacity to learn is interesting - he wonders what sort of tasks the Napoleons are expected to fill in addition to cooking. There is relatively little information in relation to the drive size, but still a considerable amount.

"You don't happen to have the password?" he asks, sarcastically. It would save them both an excessive amount of time in each other's company.

"I guess I've plain forgotten it," she answers, in her best 'helpless female' impersonation. Will submerges himself while she prods Hannibal.

"Tell me about yourself," she suggests to the android, and Hannibal is quiet for a moment. "How does it feel to be the last complete functioning unit of your kind?"

"I'm not," Hannibal answers, but he sounds uncertain.

Lounds sighs, patiently. "Well I suppose not, but I did say complete. Though you're modified too, aren't you? Oh don't look at him, just tell me what's in that interesting head of yours."

"I'm told I'm infuriating," Hannibal answers, by way of deflection, and Freddie laughs, pats Hannibal with a cool affection.

The encryption is stubborn, tricky. Will has to finesse it, then turn it upside down almost and try several different things. At times it seems almost ready to give up, and then something new slides into place and he has to fight to keep what footholds he's made in decoding it. All the while there is the quiet discussion in the background, and for the most part, Freddie at least seems entertained with Hannibal - amused by him, in a way that's not wholly superficial or genuine.

Will finally finishes the unlock, and sits back with a sigh and a sore neck.

"He's cute," she decides, coming to sit in the chair Hannibal usually occupies. "Did you get it?"

"Yeah, it just has to run until it's done translating it into unencrypted files for you. I won't even have to delete the originals to do it, it can just go back on the same drive." Will rubs his neck, then his eyes.

"Isn't it just amazing what they do these days? You really should upgrade," she says, and then into the stony silence. "No, I mean really. You asked me yesterday if I worked for the government, Mr. Graham. And the answer is... not always, but sometimes certainly. I'm a Repossession Agent, Mr. Graham."

Will stops moving for a moment before slowly dropping his hand to rest in his lap. He knows Hannibal is still in the kitchen, close enough to hear, busying himself with something quiet or just standing there. He knows that Freddie is just as aware of it. The very thought makes him uncomfortable.

"Are you my ultimatum then?" he asks finally, pushing himself to sit straighter on the stool he's on, one leg curled up to rest toe-down against the metal support, the other flat on the floor. He folds his hands into a gentle downward steeple and tilts his head. "Nice of you to make an appointment."

Freddie's smile grows by a degree into something that is almost genuine. Almost.

"Perhaps a gentle reminder," she amends for him, resting one arm against the workbench as she leans a little closer. Will forces himself to stay as he is. "He is one of the only two complete models still around, Mr. Graham, he is very, very valuable."

"And as most valuable things, he is just not available." Will responds, aiming for gentle finality but hitting somewhere near quiet desperation. He has had dealings with government officials before, legally and otherwise, it's perhaps the only reason he hasn't yet found himself behind bars, because so many people who keep the law enjoy bending it. But something about this woman radiates danger in a way that has Will genuinely worried.

"That's too bad." Freddie replies, and again her tone skirts genuine. She's a frightfully good actress. They're quiet for a moment, and Will lets his eyes slip to the drive that's decrypting, wondering who it had belonged to once and where they were now. He's brought back from his thoughts by Freddie's gentle voice again.

"What's so special about him?"

He's unsure how to answer for a moment, not without sounding like a person who's forgotten the borderlines between humans and their robotic counterparts.

"I'm not a fan of change," he says instead, "The offer of a switch is generous but inappropriate." he licks his lips nervously and takes a breath, "Perhaps if the dexterity feature is what the government wants, they should consider outsourcing people to build them replicas."

"Oh they *are*," She answers, brightly. "You didn't think they were using the actual parts? No, Mr. Graham, they just want to protect the design. Theirs is new, of course, but close enough that I guess the worry has arisen that someone will take one of these old ones apart and just... design a robot proof bomb I suppose."

She makes a fluttering gesture, and her eyes slide toward the slow progress bar on the drive.

Freddie licks her lips, and when she looks up, she traps Will's eyes with her own gaze. "Do you know why I do it, Mr. Graham?"

She doesn't wait for an answer, she just gets up again, gracefully levering herself out of her chair. "Because it is so *gratifying* to pull them apart. Really, I know it sounds like a little boy with a butterfly but smashing them up is almost the only way I get off anymore."

She grins at him, for a moment, takes advantage of his continued silence, moving toward the island counter to watch Hannibal move around in the kitchen. He looks up as she speaks, but seems to sense she isn't speaking to him this time. She smiles at him, and he looks uncertain, then smiles in return.

"I used to turn them off, it was just too... you know. I'd apologize, it's not their fault, whatever," she reveals, looking back at Will over her shoulder. "And then one day this guy made my life hell for hours trying to keep me away from his stupid *appliance* and I was just so *mad* you know? I was going to get him back. So I took it out on his stupid machine. I smashed its face in with a crowbar and yanked out the goodie box, and I thought 'Next time, I'll leave it on'.

I haven't gone back since.

It's hypnotic, you know. They aren't programmed with a sense of their own obsolescence. They *just can't* understand what's happening to them. They can't comprehend why I would want to take out this part or that part and leave them on, when the part's perfectly good. And they still try to help."

She looks hungry now, but in a way that's controlled. She leans back, looking at Will. Hannibal has gone still in the kitchen, quiet. She flashes Will a reassuring smile and moves around the edge of the counter. "They try to help with even all their moving parts gone, all they have left is that programming to be *useful*. That's a little boring these days, but some of them... Some of them with chips that have your name almost aaaaaaaaallllll over them, Mr. Graham, scream. Some pretend to beg, tell me they're still useful."

Lifting her hands she reaches for Hannibal's face again, and this time her touch is almost tender, as if she were imagining doing everything she described to him. "I don't think yours would, though. You'd never take his dignity from him, would you? I won't find any extra holes on this model, will I?"

Freddie tosses her hair and continues. Hannibal is holding utterly still, trying to figure out what she wants from him.

"The best part - the *very* best part, Mr. Graham, aside from knowing I'm the last one who will ever see them move, is at the end. They wind down like an old analog tape recorder - they get slower and slower but still hanging on, until the only way you can tell they're still in there is the blinking. You can still lean down and let them die happy, whatever that means for them."

Will is halfway out of his seat when Freddie raises herself up on her tiptoes. "All I have to do is lean in very close and tell them, '*shhh, shhh you're still useful*'."

The whisper delivers itself against Hannibal's ear and the android recoils, and Will has never seen quite that expression on Hannibal's face. It firms quickly into a hard blankness, and almost too late Will realizes there is still a heavy kitchen utensil grasped in Hannibal's left hand. Shadows of anger pass through the android's features, dangerous and threatening, and Will's stomach drops as he anticipates the worst. Even Freddie shrinks back, suddenly afraid.

But Hannibal has frozen solid, still. Locked up like he did when something was too difficult to work around. Belatedly, Will realizes Hannibal is holding a tenderizer, and tries to catch his breath. Freddie recovers first.

"*Uh oh*," she begins, feigning innocence, letting her tone return to the lightness it had when she entered. "Oh, Mr. Graham, I do believe we are on *very* dangerous ground here. I almost believed it was about to hurt me... you haven't done anything silly, have you?"

Will's lungs burn before he realizes there's still air in them, trapped and pressing against him seeking to seep out. He lets it out in a controlled exhale through his nose, eyes still on the implement in Hannibal's hand. Behind him, the little drive beeps and seems to set his breathing to regular again, though a little stuttered.

"You should have no problem with the drive," he breathes, forcing himself to stand straighter and turn away from the scene in the kitchen. Hannibal has frozen in a way as to suggest something in his processing has staggered him to a halt, he'll need to reset him before starting up the base system again. What worries Will is that he has never seen Hannibal overload all his capacity this way.

"The files there are both the encrypted ones and the copies you can access." he continues, directing his panic into movement as he scrolls through the drive for a final check, unplugs it and holds it out, expecting Freddie to come and get it herself.

"Perhaps," he says quietly, when the drive is taken from him by delicate, gentle fingers, "You shouldn't choose quite so challenging an encryption. So you don't forget it."

Will's eyes meet Freddie's and it takes him a moment to realize that her pupils are blown still, enough to be obvious and worrying and he wants her out of his space and away from Hannibal so much it's almost a physical ache. Regardless he shows no indication of such, just swallows into the silence and waits.

"I suppose I should," she says, taking the drive, careful to brush his fingers with hers and then smiling. "You're alright, Mr. Graham. You're just so good at this. So I guess a little friendly word from professional to professional. Free tip, anyway."

She tucks the drive into her bag distractedly. "I have to come and collect your Hannibal by Friday, if you haven't turned it in already. I have a contract and all, just business, you know how it is. So why don't you save yourself - well, us both really - a little pain and take out what you want to keep, with the exception of those clever hands of his of course, and the mechanism that drives them."

Stretching her back, Freddie heads for the door, making to see herself out. "I'll even report that all the parts were intact and he was turned over without incident so you can still submit your request for your replacement. I mean, how's a girl like me supposed to be expected to keep track of *every little part*, right?"

Showing her teeth wickedly, she sees herself out, letting the door swing shut behind her and leaving Will alone and breathless in his own space. It takes him a moment to realize she'd left the pay for the job - and a hefty tip - on the kitchen counter at some point.

Will lets out another breath and crumples, arms crossed over the low divider, head bent over them to breathe, but it gets harder and harder with every inhale and soon the breaths come too quickly the oxygen hitting him harder than it should and he manages to stumble to the sink and retch.

There's a reason Will refuses to let his mind see the droids he works on as living beings. There is a reason he reserves judgement on what they will be used for, what the parts he puts in them will be exploited for, he refuses to give so much of himself to these machines because once they leave his hands he has no control of what happens to them, of what's done to them. And now he knows in graphic detail, thanks to the calm commentary of the most frightening human being Will has ever encountered.

The very thought of that happening to Hannibal, the one machine he does care for, does control the fate of, makes his eyes close tight and his throat burn with bile. It's obscene. It's wrong. And for a long time Will stays as he is, eyes closed and body pitched forward over the deep sink in his kitchen, hands curled over the sides of the counter to keep himself stable. Then he reaches up to turn on the tap to wash the mess away, to swallow down the water and bring himself to a semblance of normalcy. He rubs the cool water against his neck and over his face, scrubbing his eyes before grabbing a towel to pat himself dry.

Hannibal stands as he was left, the same defensive position, expression deceptively blank, hand curled hard enough around the implement in his hand to stretch the skin over his knuckles. It takes Will a lot of twisting to get it out of his grip. He waits a long time before powering him down, watching Hannibal's eyes blink a few times before closing, head dipping forward in rest, body balanced by the internal system that holds equilibrium. In the silence Will studies him again, the carefully detailed skin, the softness of the expression, the things the machine is capable of because of some design from years ago; what Will has given him is completely invisible. It's his ability to turn his head a certain way, to move with a grace reserved for felines and models of a much newer release, to respond with tone and sarcasm, to attempt to understand jokes and repeat them... all of those things are things Will has given him. If he takes them away, the only person who will miss them is himself.

He walks around to the back of the android and works the flap open to reveal the set of chips lined up parallel at the base of his neck. Without a word he pulls the newest addition and

closes Hannibal up again. Then he starts him again, running the usual diagnostics, watching as Hannibal stretches his neck, flexes his fingers, blinks to adjust to his surroundings. Will presses the chip into his palm so hard the edges cut lines into his skin.

"Good morning, Will."

And the tone has changed, just a subtle thing, back to how it had been for the year he'd had his curiosity chip installed, but somehow suddenly so empty and foreign and indifferent it makes Will want to scream.

"It's afternoon." he responds, not his usual greeting, and watches as Hannibal tilts his head, turns it to the window to gauge the position of the sun again before returning his eyes to Will.

"It is 11:38am," Hannibal responds unhelpfully, "Still technically morning for another twenty-two minutes."

"Shut up!" Will blinks rapidly and takes a breath. He hasn't lost his temper at Hannibal since the very early days of owning him, and even then it had been a calm, collected sort of anger, directed at the droid with sarcasm he couldn't then understand, or into mutters he couldn't hear.

Hannibal turns curiously toward him, but his eyes lack some of the warm, brown depth they had somehow acquired. Will thinks he'd first noticed it in the dark. Then, it had been a trick of the light somehow. The acrylic didn't have all of the things reality did - it couldn't. But now the trick is gone, and in Hannibal's eyes there is the same curiosity perched on the edge of his next decision to be wry or frank, but not softness.

He takes the order, goes quiet, accessing memory banks to resume his functions, to recalibrate his priority trees back to how they were several days ago - at the time of the last backup that didn't take the compassion chip into account, and after a moment the decision trees spring to life and Hannibal moves back to a useful function, taking up a cloth and cleaning.

If he remembers what had happened - if the critical error had not dumped his memory prematurely, before the short term could be sifted, then he gives no sign of it, no indication of distress. Will watches him methodically scrubbing the counters, with the chip digging into the palm of his hand and the thin cut there until it oozes again and he finally realizes that Hannibal will not speak until he is again given permission.

Will sinks into the chair at the tiny kitchen table as if all his muscles had failed at the same time and scrubs a hand over his face, and Hannibal brings him a glass of water, sets it gently at Will's elbow, and says nothing, offers nothing. He doesn't have anything to offer in the face of this upset - aside from the piece settled squarely in Will's hand.

Will just sits, sets his hand on the surface of the table again, watching the blood smear over his skin and the chip. He wonders if it will damage it. Hopes it does. Hopes the iron in the blood oxidizes, corrodes, destroys the stupid thing, because he won't be able to bring himself to do it otherwise. He swallows and ignores the water for the moment, eyes unfocused, a middle space between something and nothing at all.

"I'm going to take you apart." Will says finally, tone quiet. He hears Hannibal stop what he's doing and turn around to look at him. He presses his lips together tightly and relaxes them, "Sell you for parts. Make enough money to move out of here, further into the city maybe. Forget I even had you."

He gets no reply, the command to remain silent still in Hannibal's memory. But all his concentration is now on Will, expression still strangely clear. Will's eyelids flutter a little but he doesn't blink. When he speaks again his voice is hoarse.

"You have no idea, do you? It doesn't matter to you that you could be unmade does it?" he looks at Hannibal helplessly, almost willing him to respond, to react, to do something more than stand and stare at Will with his wide calm eyes. He wants him to do what the chip in his hand had made him do. "It doesn't matter to you that I would give you up, after putting so much time into you, so much work, patience, care. You'll just go, won't you?"

He blinks rapidly and looks down, letting out a slow breath before curling his bottom lip inwards, mouth slightly open to breathe, tongue pressing the soft skin of his lip in soft patterns.

"If I let them dismantle you, I'll be alone." he says, recalling Hannibal's words of the night before, spoken with such concern then, such a deep need to know if Will would be ok with that. He gets no reply, and feels the anger build again. Against the situation, against Freddie and her words, their truth, against himself...

"I'll be alone, Hannibal!" he yells, staring at him, "Does that not matter anymore? Answer me!"

Hannibal, granted the permission he needed at last, moves forward instead of immediately answering. He has nothing to offer - no suggestions play themselves up into availability in his sets of interaction modes, nothing that allows him to do what it would take to give Will what he wants.

He cannot look distressed, certainly cannot feel it - even with the compassion chip in, he shouldn't have been able to feel it, but the ghost, the mimic of it had been enough for William to believe in it.

Hannibal cycles his options, standing very close, and then offers his hands, palms up, low. For a moment, Will thinks it is a helpless, defeated gesture and then he realizes it's more than Surrender wholesale, it's a gesture of trust. Hannibal is turning over his defining feature willingly, offering the hands the government wanted with absolute trust to Will. "They only need a couple of parts," Hannibal rationalizes, and his tone is strangely low. It fails to modulate properly into emotion, but as a joke it is a failure.

"Will you remember to eat?" Hannibal asks after a time, and there is something odd now in the response, the android's eyes are mostly closed. It is perhaps a failing connection that has yet to resolve itself, reaching out for the reaction that isn't available to access. It culminates in a slow blink. "And to sleep in bed?"

Will's eyes search Hannibal's face helplessly, flicking quickly over it to find something, anything, of the emotion he'd installed in him just a day before. The questions are curious, nothing more. Logic dictates he ask, as he always does, because it is in his memory that Will sleeps at his desk, that Will won't eat unless the food is given to him, sometimes forcefully, he remembers, he understands on a logical mechanical level that sleep and food are important and that without him - without him being 'useful' - Will would forget.

"Power down," he breathes, watching Hannibal straighten and tilt his head a little as though he hadn't heard. And he could easily not have. Will clears his throat and repeats the order, waiting for Hannibal to move past him before closing his eyes and rubbing his hand furiously over his face to get rid of the tears before someone sees, before Will acknowledges they're there himself.

By the time he stands up, walking to the sink to rinse the blood from his hand and set the chip aside on the counter, Hannibal has obeyed, silently sitting in his usual place with eyes closed and head down.

Will goes about the rest of his day in a daze, the apartment painfully silent without Hannibal's quiet shuffling and occasional conversation. He considers smashing the chip but finds himself, instead, cleaning it and setting it on the window sill to dry. He doesn't get much done. His mind is too preoccupied with how the morning had gone, how casual and direct Freddie had been, how Hannibal had responded, as though in self-defense, as though in defense of Will... it had been frightening. Will hadn't even considered that compassion could turn both ways. There's a reason it was outlawed as a component.

It's dark by the time Will realizes he hasn't eaten since Hannibal had made him breakfast.

Instead of going to the kitchen, he finds himself in front of Hannibal, kneeling to look up at him as he usually does on startup. He had until Friday, if Freddie's tip had been sound, and despite her undeniable cruelty Will supposes it had been, to take out anything he didn't want discovered, to reset Hannibal to his base and hope none of his memory components remembered Freddie's words. He doubts he himself would ever forget them. With a sigh he rests his head forward, against Hannibal's hand where it rests relaxed and palm-up against his leg. It's such a painfully gentle gesture, like the innocent way Hannibal had touched Will the night before, exploring him with his fingers and his eyes in absolute silence and awe. He turns his face and feels the palm slide against his cheek.

There were six days till Friday.

Will stands, returning to his workbench to retrieve the chip and screwdriver necessary to reinstall it. It's quick work, the space of a few moments, and then Will steps back, kneels, and starts Hannibal up again.

The process is similar to how he'd accepted the chip the first time, but there is a notably faster uptake. Will almost cries again at seeing the face become expressive once more, the eyes warm a little upon seeing him.

"It's evening," Hannibal comments, watching Will. The other just smiles.

"I'm an idiot," he says, waiting a moment, to see if Hannibal remembers, to see if he'll say anything, accept his apology perhaps, something. He doesn't seem inclined to, though the brows furrow gently as though he knows he should. Will just swallows. "I missed dinner."

Chapter 4

Chapter by whiskeyandspite

Chapter Summary

"What are you looking for?" Will asks, peeling back the shell on one of the shrimp with his fork.

Hannibal transfers his attention, and the Sybian follows the line of the motion wordlessly, both sets of eyes settling on Will. In one, there is blank attention, a waiting readiness for orders, and in the other... something very near enlightenment.

"I wanted to see what you see," Hannibal says, tone pitched quiet. "When I wake up."

Chapter Notes

So after that rather frightening chapter, we have Will building a sex doll, Hannibal interested in the process, and a massage that doesn't quite end how either thought.

"It's not um," Chilton offers, trying to find a decent way to describe it over the phone, before he settles for. "It's responsive, but in a generic way. It says the same things five times in a row. I feel like it's faking - of course it is faking."

Chilton sighs. And it makes a faint whush of air against Will's ear through his glass. Hannibal sets a plate of cinnamon rolls down, and Will wonders if he has time for this - though he will need the money. "Can you make it not fake? Or at least make it seem less like it is?"

There is a pause, a hesitation against the silence Will offers, before his potential customer continues. "And it's supposed to self-lubricate. It doesn't."

Will presses a knuckle between his teeth and holds, eyes determinedly on the food in front of him until he's certain he'll be able to reply without laughing.

"Right," he says after a moment, clearing his throat, "So you would like the linguistic capabilities adjusted," he lists, determined to stay professional, "I will check over the... anal accessories." he presses his lips together, and despite trying, with all his might, to stay calm, his voice shakes at the end, "Did you also need a penile adjustment?"

He resolutely doesn't look at Hannibal, as he feels the other pause and slowly turn to look at him. If he looks back he will not be able to keep a conversation going.

There's a flustered sound on the other end, as though Chilton nearly dropped the phone.

"I don't need -"

"For your Sybian." Will confirms, mouth working not to smile.

"Ah," there's a pause, consideration, "Yes, I suppose I may as well."

There's a heavy pause between them before Will takes pity on the man.

"I have an opening in my schedule today." he says, "But it will take me until tomorrow to get all the components to fully function."

"I need to leave it overnight?"

Will resists the urge to ask the man if he'd trust him with it, not that he would go anywhere near a Sybian for anything but work.

"I will aim to complete it by this evening." he amends, "But the price will be higher for the rush order."

Hannibal's expression is just the right shade of curious that Will has to pinch the bridge of his own nose hard not to laugh into the phone.

"That's fine," Chilton answers, and he sounds like he's already had about enough of his Sybian's issues. Will can hardly blame him, but his problems were mostly self-inflicted after all. "I'll bring it by on my way to work."

This time, it at least arrives in suitable clothing. The Sybian has round, boyish features but doesn't have an immature body at least. The posture is subservient as it steps inside, and it offers an appeasing bow to Will, and then attempts to do the same to Hannibal, before something in it recognizes the kinship.

"Ann-yeong haseyo,'" Hannibal greets it, politely, and it actually smiles - not as well as Hannibal, the gesture is almost a toothy grimace, but it's clear that it's meant to be a smile. Hannibal has to still the stream of Korean that follows with an apology, and an explanation that he doesn't have the appropriate language fully installed.

"I'll have to go and get the parts," Will tells Chilton, as the other watches the two interact as if they were total aliens. "As long as I don't run into a hitch trying to locate anything, I may have the work done by seven or eight this evening."

"That would be fine," Chilton answers, hesitant - it's clear he wants to say something, deliver some warning, but in the end he just keeps his mouth closed instead of trying to warn Will Graham off of his Sybian's supposed virtue. "I work late anyway. Give me a call if you'll need to keep it later."

Will turns the Sybian off before he leaves. He's less worried something will happen and more concerned that Hannibal will be taxed by the thing.

The docks are, as usual, bustling. Will checks his funds before walking over to Zeller's stall. Beverly will be at her 'legitimate' job today and for once Will is actually grateful; amused as Zeller will be by his selection for purchase, Bev would have never let him forget it. That said, the chance of Zeller not telling his business partner is low.

"You need a... what?"

Will closes his eyes and sighs, "A cock frame. Seven inch. With a standard arousal mechanism. Some idiot shelled out for a Sybian and is understandably having issues."

"Oh he had issues before the Sybian."

"Hey, business for me. By proxy, for you. You have the part or not?"

"God, I'll have to look. Does it have to be exactly that or can you do with something close by half an inch in either direction?" Zeller sounds a little put upon, but he goes to check through some of the parts bins in back. The row he looks in has the plastic bins taped over with black tape, to prevent any sensitive eyes from seeing the contents within. "I hear about more trouble with those things, you wouldn't believe - well maybe you would."

He fishes out the requested part, and seems relieved to find it bagged and tagged with the appropriate information. "Alright, one seven inch fake penis good for most models produced in Asia. Knockoffs for a knockoff, it only makes sense. Anything else before I have to go wash my hands?"

Will’s smile turns downright evil. Then his expression clears.

“Anal ring. Self-lubricating.”

Zeller makes a sound between scandalized and revolted and closes his eyes for a long time before nodding and stepping back towards the covered bins.

“Only you, Graham.”

Will just laughs and doesn’t argue. They negotiate price for a while, Will bringing up favors he’s done in favor of knocking down the cost a little. Zeller’s much easier to push than Bev is, another reason he’s grateful that she isn’t here to mortify him and he can mortify her colleague instead. They settle, Will pays, and does a round of the rest of the stalls before finally approaching Price.

He sets the part he’d acquired from Zeller on the table and levels Price with a look.

“I’m working. I need something to cover that.”

“You won’t be working long if you don’t cover that, yea.” Comes the bored reply, and Will snorts, shaking his head. The man steps back, gauges the size by sight alone before reaching under the table for a battered-looking box. He sets it down and sifts through.

“Seven inches,” he says, nodding as he keeps searching, “Someone’s overcompensating.”

“You have no idea.” Will deadpans, watching the progress with lightly pursed lips. In his opinion anyone willing to spend the equivalent of an average person’s yearly salary on a sex doll is overcompensating for more than their lack in the nether region. Sybians cost more than Alexanders, if the currency conversion is the same as it was the last time Will worked on one.

Price finally settles for blandly dumping the box of pre shaped seven inch phalluses out, sending them wobbling and half rolling along the table. "I haven't seen this many pricks since high school," he sighs, the joke a tired old one. "Pick your skin color, aim for slightly pinker I guess."

Will attempts to find one that has the closest match to the skin tone of the Sybian, but he will likely have to do some airbrush work. Briefly, he allows that Chilton wasn't very specific with his request, and Will could always pick the least appropriate color to apply, but he takes pride in his work.

"I swear there's more money in this every day," Price sighs. "If people would just get out of the house more... then again, I guess why would you need to? Are you sure you don't want two?"

Price leans on the counter. "Did you get the repair done on your Hannibal by the way?" Price asks, as he slides the silicon superskin - carefully engineered against allergic reaction - into a packaging envelope. He weighs the skin and sells it by the ounce, in this case. "You'll have to start trying to find aftermarket parts soon enough, I'm afraid. If I were you, I'd stockpile. It just so happens I have a size eleven to match this, you know, if you've changed your mind."

Price grins, and waggles the package at Will. It wobbles in faintly obscene suggestion.

“You don’t wear envy well.” Will tells him, setting his money down and taking the package with a thin smile.

By the time he gets home, he’s calmed down enough not to laugh at random intervals to himself. It’s a Sybian, a delicate job, a rather weirdly humiliating one for the poor machine. He’s a professional, he can get over it. he takes the stairs to his apartment and opens the door to be greeted by the smell of delicious food.

He considers the merits of eating before such a procedure but knows Hannibal won’t let him work in peace until he does. What amuses him is he will need the android’s help for certain adjustments.

“Whatever that is I am more than happy to eat it.” he assures him, sending him a smile and feeling his heart beat a little harder at the smile he gets in return.

"It's chicken manicotti," Hannibal reveals, as he sets the plate down, offering to take the bag from Will and settle it aside. He takes it to the work station and sets it down there, where it will be safely away from any chance of getting wet or dirty. "And I hoped you wouldn't forget lunch today."

Hannibal pauses in the doorway before returning, looking back at the powered down Sybian as it sits, arms curled around it's legs to keep itself small and unobtrusive. For a moment he considers it, as if attempting to try and decide how it fits into his philosophy.

"What are you testing the compassion chip for?" Hannibal asks at last, after a long silence. "Will he be getting one?"

He stops looking at the Sybian and moves into the kitchen, to see to cleaning up after lunch. There are leftovers, which he neatly packs away as well.

Will pauses for a while, not sure how to reply. In truth, he isn't sure why he was working on the chip at all, simple curiosity perhaps. So he tells Hannibal so.

"Maybe I just wanted to see if I could." He says eventually, spearing another piece of chicken, "To see if I could get something that has never had access to human emotions before to understand them, or at least to work with the concepts provided."

His eyes move to Hannibal for a long moment.

"He will not be getting one." He says at length before returning his gaze to his food. "It will do him far more harm than good."

Hannibal accepts the information, as he did most of it. For a moment, he looks... distant, like he was going through a set of processes that was entirely new to him. He doesn't think aloud, whatever the issue is, or at least he holds the question until William has done eating, and Hannibal promptly takes his plate to wash it.

"Why will it do me more good than harm?" he asks, as if musing. The tone is not quite at the mastery of rhetorical, but it indicates a question he is already asking himself - putting the input back through his banks of memories and seeking to see if he has a proper answer to it - but he's asking Will's answer, too.

The questions stumps Will a moment and he just blinks. Then his brows go up and he tilts his head in a gesture suggesting he's been one-upped.

"I never said it would," he replies honestly, "But you have the capacity to take in far more information than a Sybian, and process it." he pauses, hands curled gently in front of him, the knuckle of one thumb tapping lightly against his chin. He blinks. "He shouldn't be made to remember the details of his own usefulness." He adds finally.

When his eyes focus again and he directs them to Hannibal he offers a small smile.

"I may need your help to move him." he says, "I'm putting the language chip in last, but until then I need him flat on the workbench."

Hannibal nods once, accepting the task conferred to him. He is strangely quiet, as if still considering what Will had said, trying to turn the process over in his mind on the Sybian, and its functionality. He doesn't feel one way or the other on it - he can't, except perhaps an emulation of concern for the more simply constructed android. Then some old process kicks

in and decides that the item is unimportant to his daily functioning and he ceases devoting processing power to it.

Easy as balling up a piece of paper and tossing it in the trash. Occasionally, that's an ability that Will envies him.

Hannibal crouches to unfold the Sybian, gently coaxing the limbs into a position that makes it easier to pick up. The androids are not much heavier than a human equivalent in height and build, but the stainless steel interior and machine internals lend enough weight to make moving them awkward without assistance. Luckily, they usually provided their own. Hannibal seems to struggle to get it up into his arms and balanced, perhaps because of the unexpected way the weight shifts given the various fluid tanks the thing required.

"Which way?" Hannibal asks, carefully balancing the not-quite-limp body in his arms, ready to settle it onto the workbench.

Will gestures, having set up a rolled up sweater of his as a makeshift pillow to keep the neck aligned properly. He helps Hannibal arrange him, despite the machine being off, careful to lay him out in a way that would represent comfort were the android capable of feeling it. it makes Will’s job easier.

Then he hooks his ankle around the leg of his stool and slides it over, sitting down in a smooth graceful movement before reaching over for his bag of supplies. He doesn’t need Hannibal’s help in this particular task; the installation is simple, it’s connecting the tiny wires to hook up to the leading cable that answers for pleasure and joy that will need some finger work. Will frowns at the wording.

He thanks Hannibal, belatedly, offers an apologetic smile, and takes out his purchases, laying them on the small side table that rests parallel to the low divider separating them from the kitchen. Will rarely does actual body work on his workbench, he usually works with fiddly parts that need to be installed in the main model that arrives later, or sits waiting. It takes a few moments for Will to adjust to his new space – or lack thereof – before he purses his lips and carefully undresses the Sybian.

It’s an average-looking thing, pleasing to the eye to be sure, but nothing spectacular. Will supposes for the models that make one’s jaw drop you would need to go to Korea to deliver it home personally. He shudders to think how much those models are. Instead, he thinks about how best to approach removing one organ and replacing it with the other, the mechanism is the same but seaming the skin here will be trickier.

For a few blissful moments he almost forgets Hannibal is in the room with him. but then he asks a question, and Will’s cheeks darken, wondering if keeping the curiosity chip in Hannibal had really been the best idea.

"Can he enjoy it?" Hannibal asks, genuinely curious now. He has stayed back, out of the space Will needs to move, but he hasn't been given any clear direction and has no looming tasks to perform that are more important than being available for Will in case the other needs him to assist.

Will doesn't look up to answer. "In a way," he says. "I suppose. The same way you enjoy things, Hannibal. He experiences them, and then the results are either reinforced as 'good' or 'bad'. You don't feel pride for good or shame for bad, but it's been coded in that you should continue doing what you are reinforced to."

"So I suppose if his owner wants him to enjoy it, he can." Will makes the first cut, and his palm feels sore as he does it, then he jumps when Hannibal's hand settles softly against his back as the other moves behind him to better see what he's doing, before he settles into the chair he usually occupies, now somewhere down by the extended, bare feet of the Sybian.

“Is the accessory not functional?” Hannibal asks at length, and Will presses his lips together on a smile, before he stops trying to hide it. it doesn’t matter if Hannibal sees it or not. He carefully peels away the synthetic skin sheath and sets it aside before taking up a screwdriver to start working the mechanism itself off.

“Fully functional,” he tells him, “Simply unsatisfactory.” It’s delicate work; once the metal skeleton is unscrewed, the hydraulic tubes need to be pulled away and clipped. Will feels himself settle into the meditative state he usually sinks into when he’s working on something so intricate.

“Is mine satisfactory?”

Will drops the screwdriver and watches as one little clip falls further into the body of the Sybian. He’ll need to get it out before he forgets.

“Uh,” he raises his eyebrows and turns his head slightly before reaching in with a pair of tweezers to reach the clip and extract it.

“I wouldn’t know, I’ve never… had reason to check.” He deliberately doesn’t look at Hannibal as he sets the old mechanism aside – still fully functional, easy to sell – and takes up the new one, significantly bigger.

“So such an adjustment as this would not need to be made?” comes the curious inquest. Will closes his eyes slowly, licks his bottom lip into his mouth and lets out a careful breath.

“You don’t perform the functions of a Sybian, I doubt you’d need one.” He ventures.

Hannibal blinks slowly, watching Will's expression carefully, putting together his next torrent of questions as he processes the input from his first set. Will allows that such and adjustment would require major work, since at the time Hannibal was manufactured the height of such technology was barely more than a vaguely realistic doll. He wasn't intended for the purpose. He wasn't quite featureless, in that respect, but he might as well have been. He wasn't designed to consume or expel, to couple or consummate.

Then again, he wasn't designed for curiosity or compassion either, and he had taken to those. The thought catches in Will's mind like the clip in the cavity of the Sybian, and he has to very carefully try and rotate it free through the tiny hole it had slipped through in the carriage in the first place.

Hannibal leans over the table to offer a hand, closing his cool fingers over Will's and lending him the steadiness required to get the piece free again. "What if I wanted one?"

The question is aiming for humor - and a little sarcasm. It's turning the usual offer Will lays out on the table for him every time he attempts something new on its ear.

Will jerks just once and sits back, rubbing his eyes before dragging his fingers down to frame his lips and press the bottom one out of shape. His cheeks are flushed and he still refuses to look over at Hannibal. He has considered it, but never in any great capacity. Hannibal was not made for such things, it would be putting a perfectly functional android to waste making him perform such menial tasks as the android on his table was forced to.

He doesn't ask if Hannibal is serious, doesn't make a sound of indignation, or nervousness. He just sits back a moment longer, rolls his shoulders and takes up the tweezers again to continue attaching the tiny tubes to the new mechanism before placing the tweezers between his teeth, out of the way, and taking up the screwdriver again.

"Could you give me a good enough reason to give you one?" he mutters around the implement, turning his head just enough to send Hannibal a smile, almost like a challenge.

"Functionality requirement has never been a prerequisite factor," Hannibal answers, and it sounds almost stubborn. He had never needed a good enough reason for the other work, but then Hannibal, sifting trickily through his memory, sits back.

"You have tested all your other modifications for quality," he finally settles on. "What makes this different?"

The question is genuine. Hannibal doesn't really care one way or the other - well, the same could be said about getting an answer for his question. He hasn't insisted on the modification - just the continuing conversation. Will realizes that Hannibal is more interested in his reaction than the actual subject of conversation.

He carefully removes the tweezers from between his teeth and sets them down, turning to look at Hannibal fully for a moment.

"Every other modification has been given to you to allow for better expression and communication," Will tells him, "This wouldn't."

It's both honest and as much as Will can safely say. He has had Hannibal too long to simply set aside any history they have and take advantage, or make the other do it, more accurately, he would get no response from Hannibal bar those he would program.

As he would have to in the Sybian.

Will turns back and continues setting the mechanism in place, bending it with clinical accuracy for the moment to test pliancy and capacity. In theory, there should be absolutely no problem with the inner workings. He would test it, if the idea of manually pleasuring a Sybian – in front of Hannibal, no less – didn't make Will feel like he'd need to take a scalding shower.

He reaches for the sheath of skin he'd bought to replace the other and regards it with slight distaste. Setting skin is always the same. The same as it had been when he had set Hannibal's hand. It requires patience. And touching. Initially it requires actual application by rolling the skin down and over. Will has half a mind to send Hannibal away on a task but thinks better of it.

In some hollow part of his mind he refuses to access, the part that had woken in terror when Freddie had given her ultimatum, Will thinks that Hannibal may watch and remember, may replicate the touch simply by mimic. Another part makes him almost sick with the thought that he even wanted such a thing.

He lets out a long breath and sits up higher to roll the skin down.

Hannibal does watch, but it's not with any intense curiosity. Will expects there won't be any more until the situation changes and the option re-engages as one that hasn't met negative input in the circumstance.

Will works from the top down, careful to get the alignment just so. He had seen the occasional botched job done by an amateur figuring they could save a few dollars doing it on their own. In fact, one of his very first modification repairs had been one with the skin glued on, undeniably, upside-down. He'd needed three beers before he could begin to work on that one, and it had been before Hannibal had anything more than his very first changes, but even then he'd come to check on Will in his fits of laughter.

He aligns everything just so - in spite of the simplicity, there is an art. It's a ridiculous sort of art, but Will wasn't above it to be paid - and well, for the rush job. He doesn't have any solid plans yet, but he knows that whatever he does is going to require money, and lots of it. More than he would see regularly and certainly more than he would if he kept his morals intact.

He still uses a tool to press the skin into place rather than his fingers, certain to get it to affix just right. He almost doesn't breathe until it's done, and then he sits back and stretches his neck.

Hannibal blinks twice, and tilts his head. "It's disproportionate," he observes.

Will laughs, rolling his head back in a slow motion to feel the muscles stretch and his spine click. He groans quietly and drops his head forward again.

"The client was very specific." He says instead. It is disproportionate. It will function perfectly well, and the Sybian will have no issue walking, but it does look somewhat comical. Will tilts his head in consideration. Behind him, to his amusement, he hears Hannibal do the same.

They are already into the late afternoon, and Will sends Hannibal away to start on dinner, watching the expressions war on Hannibal's face as he considers refusing and staying to watch, before his programming – and sense of usefulness – win out and he moves to the kitchen. There are leftovers, but he pulls a pan out from the cupboard to make something to eat with them.

Will uses the semblance of privacy to adjust the Sybian's position and work on installing the new ring. It's less fiddly but far more intrusive and he spends most of his time with his eyes closed, brows furrowed in a mixture of apology and disgust as he works the old part free and installs the new one. That done, he covers the android up with a shirt and goes to clean his hands.

Hannibal gives him the sink, moving over from rinsing frozen shrimp to separate it out. He shakes the colander deftly, and spreads the contents onto a baking sheet, until they're arranged in fussy lines with nothing touching. He has only thawed and prepared enough for one meal.

"Is he complete?" Hannibal asks, testing the waters for curiosity again. He had combined something in the food processor earlier and now he distributes the crumbling results over the shrimp, and settles them into the oven to bake, and removes from the upper rack several slices of toasted thick bread, which he sets up under a thick white kitchen cloth to keep warm.

"Just the language chip left," Will tells him, drying his hands carefully and leaning his back against the counter, watching Hannibal work. In its own way it's beautiful, the Hannibal models had been preloaded with over 1 million recipes upon order and with the ability to upload and teach many more. Will has never bothered with that feature, considering he didn't used to eat regularly until Hannibal had started reminding him. he hadn't tampered with it either, and they still have not had a repeat of a meal since Hannibal had come into his possession. He's glad, at least, Hannibal is resourceful enough to work with whatever he can find in Will's kitchen.

Of late, however, he has made the effort to spend some of his money on the more obscure foodstuffs, such as the shrimp.

"Do you think you'll still need to keep your appointment for next week?" Hannibal asks afterward, recalling the detail from several days past.

"Not unless something goes very, very wrong." Will replies quietly, blinking to get himself back to the now. He'd forgotten almost that by Friday he would no longer have Hannibal unless he did something. It still escaped him what in particular, but he knows he can't just empty him of components and pass him over to be destroyed. He knows that in the most extreme case, Hannibal will be taken from him by force.

The pause grows heavy, and after a moment more Will blinks and offers Hannibal a warm smile.

"I'll start adjusting the chip. Feel free to interrupt me for dinner, or if our client comes back early."

"I will interrupt in about half an hour," Hannibal promises, knowing the cooking time intimately, having an internal timer that would hold down to the second. He hesitates, as Will turns, and them moves to wash his hands again after handling the raw shrimp.

"Do you have a favourite?" He asks, after a moment, without looking up. Will is at the threshold, in the doorway, and he turns back, uncertain what Hannibal means for a second.

"Something you'd like me to cook again for you?" Hannibal clarifies, looking over his shoulder and seeing the need for clarification written on Will's features.

Will doesn't speak for a while, long enough for Hannibal to stop moving and check if what he'd said had offended Will or startled him. he finds it's neither, but Will isn't looking at him, his eyes are directed at the ground, lips slightly parted in thought or just to breathe it's unclear. After a moment more Will brings them together and gently parts them with the tip of his tongue.

"One of your first meals, actually," he says, "Pilaf. I had no lamb, you worked beef into it instead."

His voice sounds distant, and then he blinks and that tone disappears. His smile isn't quite full though when he directs it at Hannibal.

"That would be nice to have again. Maybe Thursday?"

Hannibal watches him before inclining his head, eyes flicking down as well, before he straightens and offers Will the same smile he had given him, unsure of which of those in his memory to bring up appropriately. But this one he associates with that expression on Will's face and knows does not mean genuine enthusiasm.

"Of course."

"Right."

Will nods and moves to continue to his work bench, waking the Sybian and asking him politely to dress. The order is obeyed quickly and enthusiastically enough, and he waits for it to stand in front of him before explaining his work process. When Will started doing this, he doesn't even remember. Perhaps with Hannibal, perhaps before and the habit had cemented itself with Hannibal, but when he's stressed or tired, Will narrates what he does to the android he's working on. He's never had any of them complain, though he doubts it's their politeness and more their inability to tell them to shut up.

He goes about testing the capacity of the chip first, getting the Sybian to repeat phrases or tricking it into using new ones. Chilton had exaggerated, there weren't five phrases recycled, there were seven, and Will leaves the Sybian on as he removes the chip and inserts it into the digital workstation. Much easier to upload new phrases and responses into the pre-existing chip than it is to build a new one. This one worked perfectly well, it was just not filled to capacity.

He resists the urge to put inappropriate things into the memory – 'well, I guess I can work with that' – and simply adds phrases he feels would be appropriate for a machine of that calibre. He checks over the presets for simple wordless responses and finds that that, at least, is not wanting. He amuses himself by opening a few and adjusting the tone, enough so it lilts in the middle or dips lower as a human voice would when pleasure hit a certain point.

He only stops when Hannibal interrupts him, as warned, for dinner. Then Will returns the chip to the android and tests a few of the phrases before telling it to sit in the chair Hannibal usually occupies as he goes to get his food.

Hannibal serves Will politely - the crumbled topping having melted away and revealing itself to be a seasoned butter, garlicky and rich on the shrimp itself, and pooled in the plate below, ready for the bread to receive. But he doesn't linger in the kitchen for once, he moves beyond.

Hannibal crouches on the floor at the feet of the other android and looks up at it, as if trying to see the changes Will had wrought coming to life in its eyes. He so rarely gets to see the full results of Will's work, so the curiosity is in part, natural, but William isn't certain what Hannibal expects to find.

"What are you looking for?" He asks, peeling back the shell on one of the shrimp with his fork.

Hannibal transfers his attention, and the Sybian follows the line of the motion wordlessly, both sets of eyes settling on Will. In one, there is blank attention, a waiting readiness for orders, and in the other... something very near enlightenment.

"I wanted to see what you see," Hannibal says, tone pitched quiet. "When I wake up."

His face changes for a moment, and the expression is intense when he transfers it back to the Sybian, looking into eyes that should hold the same ability to synthesize expression as his own - perhaps better, and by some trick of the light Hannibal looks overwhelmingly sad.

"Thank you," he tells the other android, and then he gets up. In the span of seconds, he has found a way to recompose himself - if any of it had been more than just a ghost to Will's tired eyes.

Will turns away, keeps his eyes on his dinner – which is delicious – and tries to slow his mind down. Hannibal's response to the compassion chip is far faster and deeper than had been his response to curiosity. Perhaps because one compliments the other, perhaps because now everything Hannibal sees is added to his memory with an association – perhaps a scent, temperature, texture – and the depth of such a feeling drives him to discover more.

There's a knock on the door and Will nearly falls out of his seat climbing out of it to let Chilton in.

He explains what he'd replaced, gives gentle advice on how to get the most out of the language chip, and names his price, watching as Chilton's eyes linger on Hannibal even as his Sybian stands in front of him. Will wonders if he just never noticed how much unwanted attention his android gets or if he was wilfully blind to it when it didn't matter, when he didn't have only one week left before he may not have him anymore.

Chilton accepts the new information, reaches up to scratch at his neck and sighs, transferring his glance back down to his Sybian with some obvious disappointment, but he accepts the machine back anyway. Fishes out his wallet, and pays. "Next time, I guess I won't bother trying to save myself a few bucks, Mr. Graham."

"But I appreciate your discretion. When I need modifications on a new one, I guess I'll know who to call." He turns, and beckons the Sybian out with him, the android reaching up to curl his arm through the man's in a parody of affection, the full force of bubbly, youthful - but not babyish - personality coming through on the reuniting. He looks a little long-suffering, but after a moment, the Sybian's ridiculousness coaxes a hesitant, faintly embarrassed smile.

"Maybe I'll develop an interest in the classics," Chilton allows, with a sigh that suggests maybe not for a long time. "Thank you, Mr. Graham. I hope that's the last of it."

Hannibal watches them go over Will's shoulder, watches Will shut the door and from the other side the high pitched sounds of amorous overtures briefly arise before Chilton manages to give it clear enough direction that the hallway of Will's apartment complex is not an appropriate place.

Will snorts but returns to his meal anyway, tucking the money into his pocket to sort and set away later. He makes quick work of the food, taking the time to savor the taste but also keen to finish. He needs to clear his work area and check his full funds. Needs to start planning what he can do before Friday that would make even the slightest bit of difference.

He sets the plate in the sink and thanks Hannibal for the meal, wishes for a brief moment that he could share it with him instead of watching him stand to the side and wait. It’s more the sentiment of sharing an activity than the fact that Hannibal doesn’t eat that makes Will shake his head and sigh, dropping himself heavily into his seat at the workbench and rolling his shoulders slowly. He draws his arms up over his head and arches his back with a groan, eyes closed and expression pleased, just a hint of a smile on his lips.

When he drops his arms he rolls his head again, back, around and down before bringing a hand up to rub the place where his neck joins his shoulder absently.

Hands settle over his, the skin cool and dry, the touch gentle and with extreme precision. Hannibal is attentive to just where Will was rubbing, and applies very light pressure into the soothing motion. For a moment, Will doesn't quite react, and then finally he pulls his hand from beneath Hannibal's to be out of his way.

"You always touch your neck," Hannibal observes, pushing his thumb where it's the sorest, but too gently. It soothes, but doesn't ease, as if Hannibal is uncertain how much he should use. He touches further down the man's shoulders. "And here," he says, rubbing gently. "Though you have to twist."

Hannibal crouches as Will leans into the touch to increase the pressure somewhat on his own, the touch almost tantalizing in its lightness. "You'll have to tell me how much pressure, I'm sorry. I don't want to hurt you."

“You won’t, just… more there,” Will murmurs, shifting further into the touch until the pressure increases to how he wants it and he sits still. It feels unbelievably good. It’s a shock to the system how long it’s been since Will’s been touched by someone else. He touches often, the synthetic skin feeling real enough under his fingers, the fact that he works with his hands also enough to fool his mind into believing he’s satisfied with that. But having

someone else touch, someone press against the sore muscles, push against the knots… Will makes a low sound and exhales.

Hannibal hesitates - trying to decide if the noise was pain, and Will leans back further into his touch to reassure him it was anything but. Hannibal soothes the ache from his shoulders, and then goes back to working on his neck, gently again -only with a lot of coaxing can Will get him to up the pressure a little.

The knots yield under Hannibal's tireless fingers, and Will wonders why he'd never considered this before. He supposes because it requires at least a little understanding to do correctly. He could have asked at any time, but the results would have been clinical, he thinks, rather than this...

Hannibal's touch softens, and Will is loath to open his eyes, even as the touch shifts from rubbing to exploration again, gentle fingers that have taken warmth from Will's skin pushing up through the hair at the base of his neck, and then lightly against the back of his skull before they trace down again, along the sides of his neck, and then intimately behind his ears, along the line of his jaw.

Will lets out another soft moan and swallows, staying still as long as he can as Hannibal’s fingers work to tear down his defenses. He turns his head slightly and feels Hannibal cup his palm to accommodate. It’s such an intimate gesture, and with eyes closed Will can almost convince himself that this is happening with someone alive.

He has never wanted to exploit Hannibal this way, has never made the step to; to adjust him, modify him physically, to train him to massage, to pleasure… he has done none of those things, and yet he wonders, now, why. He feels Hannibal’s other hand slide palm-flat down his back and bends into the touch, feels it tentatively curl around his side and brings up a hand to encourage, resting his palm over the cool back of Hannibal’s hand.

He tells himself that at the count of ten he’ll stop. He’ll pull away and mark the gesture as inappropriate, so Hannibal knows not to initiate it again. but he can’t quite bring himself to start the count.

For all the intimacy, Hannibal seems to instinctively know how not to cross the line into obscenity. He keeps his touches soft, explorative, patiently seeking response but not, perhaps, arousal. Shifting, Hannibal moves to settle in front of Will instead, leaning against the table while Will sits and touching his hair again, then ever so gently, his eyelids.

For a time he pushes his fingertips ever so gently along the seam where they close, where Will's eyelashes rest against his cheeks, fascinated by the way the minute hairs shift under his touch, and then he turns his fingers and traces the backs of them against Will's cheeks and down. Fingertips trace the warm swell of his adam's apple, and then hesitate when Will swallows against it, and hold there until he does it again, until he parts his lips to say no at last, and finds Hannibal touching him there, too.

The soft, synthetic pad of Hannibal's thumb is warm, but only because it's picked up heat from Will's own skin. The touch is reverent, gentle and familiar, pushing his thumb against

Will's lower lip to feel the contrast of soft skin that's first dry, then when Will pushes his tongue over it in a nervous gesture, the slide eases.

Will’s breathing picks up, still steady but quicker, and he retracts his tongue before he does something stupid like pull those fingers into his mouth. He shivers lightly, eyes still closed as his body responds; he brings his hands down to grip the edges of his stool as he sits and allows this.

Hannibal lingers, thumb still pressed against the warm lip until he moves it and bends it out of shape for a moment, Will curling it into his mouth as gently biting down as the soft fingers move on. The touches stay innocent, but they don’t cease, and it takes Will a long time to force his eyes open and look up at Hannibal’s own, into the warm brown that watches him as though trying to understand.

And Will lets out a quick breath and pushes himself back, the wheels of the stool squeaking a little until naturally coming to a stop not far from where Will had been. Hannibal straightens and his brows furrow in concern.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No,” Will breathes, shaking his head to affirm, “No, no, fuck, no.” he draws a hand over his face and rubs until the phantom gentle gestures are gone, until he can feel nothing but the stretch of his skin where his hand grips it now.

“I need,” Will swallows and pushes himself to stand, stumbling a little and holding his hand out to keep Hannibal where he is when he moves to help – moves to help in a way he wouldn’t have a few days ago, before Will had brought this unholy mess on himself.

“I just need a shower.” He says, offering a very brief but reassuring smile to Hannibal before making his way there and nearly slamming the door closed behind himself.

Chapter 5

Chapter by whiskeyandspite

Chapter Summary

“When I didn’t touch you back,” Will asks quietly, waiting for Hannibal to look up, to seek back in his mind to the last time he had touched Will, “Did it feel empty?”

Hannibal's answer is nearly instant. "No," he says. There is no proper way to describe how full it felt. "Your eyes closed, your heat changed, your breath reacted. It felt full."

Chapter Notes

There is a plan, there is fluff, and soft touches and shared words.

He doesn't quite sleep. After powering Hannibal down for the evening, exhausted as he is, he lies awake. His eyes focus on the indicator light that flashes in the transformer attached to the cord that feeds power into the panel in Hannibal's shoulder, the slow on and off pulse of green then yellow indicating charging but not yet fully charged.

Will tries to close his eyes, but the future writes itself against the backs of his eyelids until he loses track of space and time and his only focus is the spin of his thoughts on what his plans are to do. The government had their worries that someone would reverse engineer the hands - similar enough to their own new dismantling robots - and find a way to use that information in designing a bomb.

He sighs out a breath harshly, and settles his hand over his face, rubbing his eyes, then his cheeks, then in a moment of distraction, he finds his fingers soft on his own mouth before irritation rises up and he flings himself into a new position. Five days.

The idea comes in the small hours, as slow and tired a lightbulb as the green pulsing light that eases reassuringly against his screwed shut eyelids to tell him that Hannibal is still there and safe for the moment. He isn't sure it will matter now but if he can design... something just as efficient without the same weakness, he can negotiate. Alternately, he's been into the mechanics of Hannibal's hands enough times that he's fairly confident he could reproduce a blueprint even now. So perhaps if the one didn't work... if he couldn't sell the government a better feat of engineering for the measly price of his one android, he could perhaps persuade them to think better of taking him by releasing the blueprints.

What danger could there really be with only two of them left... and Will's mind amends, in the darkness of night as he twitches sweaty beneath his blankets, that even now there may be one less, even now the insatiable Freddie Lounds might be reducing their number further, gleefully with a pair of kitchen shears and a blunt object, and lamenting how much better it would be with the one Will had modified. He prays that it's a collector's piece, as the sick feeling in his stomach rises again - something unmodified and simple and uncanny. Something unloved except as a status symbol.

As the sun begins to touch him through the windows in weak gold lines, Will drowses just a little. Perhaps twenty minutes, perhaps an hour, before a whisper in his dream sounds loud in his ear and wakes him...

shh, shh, you're still useful

Will rolls to lie on his back, one hand over his face, catching his breath. He has no work for the day, no clients, no chips to fix up, nothing long-term… technically he could sleep until his head stopped aching, but it hits him again how much closer he is to Friday and the very thought pushes him to move.

He finds himself in the familiar position of kneeling in front of Hannibal, remembers how the android had done the same thing the day before, to another, to see what it was like. To experience what Will experiences. It's that need to be closer, to understand, that tugs at Will's heart so much. When he reaches up to remove the cable, his hand lingers, gently stroking the skin there, before settling Hannibal's clothes over the flap as always and powering him up.

Regardless of how many years he's watched his machine power up, work, adjust to modifications, surprise him with adaptations and adopted wit, Will still sits through the entire process until Hannibal blinks at him and tilts his head in the telltale gesture before he speaks. Will grins.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, William," Hannibal answers, but today the gesture is accompanied with movement, and Hannibal lifts his hands and sets them gently on either side of Will's neck with his thumbs brushing against the man's cheeks. The gesture is brief, but deeply intimate. "You slept in bed again. Two nights is almost a record."

Hannibal smiles, and it's gentler than the humor calls for. For a long moment, he manages to look genuinely affectionate, as if waking up to Will Graham every day means the world to him. "I'm supposed to remind you when groceries are low," he finally says, getting to his feet, and he offers his hands down this time to help William up as well, shifting his weight to balance appropriately for the gesture.

Will allows himself to be helped up and rubs the back of his neck in a nervous gesture, different from the gesture he uses when in pain; the massage from the night before did wonders. He only wishes he'd been able to sleep.

"Groceries, right."

Will rarely makes a list. The only reason the reminder had been implemented was because Hannibal had found himself unable to perform his function – at the time simply cooking – and that inability was agitating his system.

“I need to get to the docks anyway.” He has a part to sell, and perhaps an idea to drop to whoever’s available. Out of habit, because he always asks, Will adds, “Do you need anything?”

Hannibal blinks twice, rapidly reviewing his memory, and then recalls. "Beef, please. Or lamb, if you'd prefer to try it the correct way."

Will nods and then reviews the fridge himself to see what the needs are as Hannibal moves to get coffee into a travel mug for him, and then wordlessly presses a warmed cinnamon roll into his hands for him to eat on the transit, and Will accepts both without protest.

There's something about the warm roll in his hand as he waits for the transit train that makes this feel final, his efforts real and desperate and necessary. Will sighs and steels himself for the docks, drinking the coffee quickly to brace himself.

He finds it quieter than usual today, and Bev is practically laying on her counter, arms folded over the flat countertop of her sale area, and she brightens up when she sees Will approaching.

"Don't tell me you had problems with your dick already?" she asks, playfully amused.

“That’s why I came to you.” Will responds, raising an eyebrow and setting his mug on the corner of the table before pushing his hands into his pockets. The smile he returns is genuine, though.

Bev grins and pushes herself up to regard Will properly. It takes a moment before she tilts her head.

“What’s got you so distracted?”

Will laughs, a short, harsh sound, and shakes his head.

“Full on last few days.” he says honestly. When he presses his lips together thoughtfully, Bev gives him the moment to gather his thoughts, though she does adjust her position enough to imply that she’s busy to anyone else seeking to buy anything for the moment. Money was one thing, came and went with the tides on the docks, but she’d worked with Will for years, and few things had him go so quiet and so still.

“Bad customers?”

“Bad news.”

“Oh?”

Will clicks his tongue quietly and straightens. “Repo.”

Bev blinks, angles her hips a little and crosses her arms over his chest.

“Shit. For your Hannibal?”

Will nods. Bev mirrors the motion.

“He’s practically an antique now, Will, finding parts for him will be near impossible in a year or two. They still offering upgrades?” Will nods, “What’s so special about him that you don’t just switch out?”

Will makes that strange sound again that would – should – pass for a laugh but doesn’t quite make it.

“I’m not a fan of change.” He says, the same answer he’d given Freddie Lounds not two days ago. It sounds just as hollow when he says it to Bev.

"Will," She says, leaning on the counter, her tone is kind. "There's a point where you're just going to have to. Those old ones aren't meant to last forever. What are you going to do in two years when his internal gyros wear out, or those batteries of his won't hold a charge anymore? Each model has proprietary parts, that's how the manufacturers make money after selling them at a loss - that and aftermarket stuff." She sighs. "You're gonna watch him wear out and eventually there's nothing you're going to be able to do about it."

She smiles into his silence, and then she gives a helpless shrug, and leans on the counter again, her hands clasped together as she leans forward, waiting for the rest. "Well okay, then what are you gonna do about Repo? I mean they'll come in with a warrant to seize, and it's not like you can send these guys off by proving you paid your bill, it's a general recall."

“Pre-emptive counter terrorism.” Will says, watching Bev’s brows furrow a little, not quite understanding yet. So he elaborates. “The government is working on robots that can dismantle bombs. Taking the human error out of a potentially fatal situation. Giving them perfect hands, no emotion.” He leans a little closer. “Foolproof in the long run. It’ll save hundreds of lives.”

Bev blinks at him, Will curls his lips and holds up his hands in demonstration.

“They’re recalling the mechanism, Bev, so no one has access to develop a bomb that could resist them. Work one mechanism against another.”

Her lips press together in a line and she swallows lightly.

“Will.”

“I know those hands so well I can rebuild them.” He says, tone dipping to be quieter, “How many others do you think can as well?”

"Well it was never a popular model," she allows, but she nods. "Probably it's not impossible that some other freak liked their enough to have a shot at remanufacturing them, and of course the people that built them in the first place. I mean that was back when these things mostly had to be built by hand."

She snaps her fingers and grins, straightens up. "Okay. You got me. I'm in, this has gotta be the most exciting thing I've had access to in a while anyway." She grins. "Wait until I tell Z. You just gotta promise me you won't bring in that weirdo skinguy."

Will raises an eyebrow and taps his hand gently against the travel mug before taking it up again.

“Jealous?”

Grinning she shifts her weight, foot to foot, clearly excited. "What do you need? And you're gonna remember this, right?"

“When have I ever forgotten?” he asks, tilting his head. He needs more than he supposes anyone at the docks has on hand. A lot of materials he can manipulate to substitute for others, but the concept in itself is not to build a bomb, but prove just how simple it could be to do so if one were to have the right instructions.

Those, Will has.

He pulls out a thin pendrive and slides it to Bev over the counter.

“I just need to see how much of this you can get. at the docks, outside them, anywhere. How easy is it to gather those things by tomorrow morning.” He gives her a gentle look, eyes narrowing a little in thought before he steps back.

“Tomorrow.” He says, in parting. “And I won’t forget.”

"Wow actual subversive movement plans," Beverly grins, picking up the thumb drive and giving a little salute with it, grinning. She straightens up, taps the drive on the counter twice, and says. "So if we save him, you are gonna let me see this unicorn you've been keeping stuffed up in your apartment, right?"

She winks to show she doesn't really mean it - that she understands some things are too close to the heart for others to properly appreciate. Sometimes it was the journey as much as the result. Will smiles gratefully as he picks up his cup, and lifts a hand to Zeller as he heads out. It's only when he's outside that Will realizes he still has the paper parcel in his bag with the discarded part from Chilton's Sybian.

He leaves it for the moment, distracted, and passes up trying to offload the part on Price. Instead he heads for the market, and finds himself lost in the aisles, browsing as if to find something new he's never brought home before. He isn't sure if he'd be challenging Hannibal, as much as he's challenging himself, trying to keep his future in mind. There is an idea seated just in the back of his mind that refuses to come forward just yet, a thought that refuses to solidify.

Finally, with a small basket of groceries that are as much oddities as standbys, the revelation comes and he has to stop in the middle of the market to make notes on his glass and do rough schematic sketches. He's in such a rush he nearly forgets the hamburger, and he irritates the line behind him by running back from the register to retrieve it.

The return trip is faster, as most returns of any nature are, and Will climbs the stairs in pensive silence. Depending on how much is available by the morning will depend on how sound Will's not-quite-prepared argument will be. He can recreate the mechanism, he can draw up blueprints, scan them into the digital unit and manipulate them in 3D. with the click of one button he could send the information to the sorts of people the government did not want knowing this.

With the same click of the button he could find himself incarcerated and Hannibal taken for parts just as easily as he would be by Friday regardless.

No. with this Will needs to be clever.

He lets himself into the apartment, eyes still somewhat glazed with distraction, and greets Hannibal faintly when the other says his name.

Hannibal greets him at the dividing counter, looking over it with some concern before he takes in that Will is whole and looks simply distracted. It takes Will a moment to feel concern in return - had Hannibal been worried? Did his compassion extend that far? Or was it just an expression he felt he should project, as Will did whenever something unexpected and potentially concerning came up with Hannibal.

"It's nearly three," Hannibal observes, perhaps revealing the source of his worry - if that was what it was. Will had missed lunch, anyway, he supposes, and if anything distressed Hannibal's stubborn systems, it was that.

He doesn't seem to know what to do with the sensation - emotion, if Will dared to call it that, so Hannibal settles his palms flat on the counter and sits still, as if threatening to freeze up again.

Will just watches him before his frown deepens a little in concern. Had he missed him? Will had spent some days out the entire time, at the docks, making house calls to the higher paying patrons, and he had come home to an overabundance of food but never something like this.

He sets the purchases aside on the table, returns the bagged part he'd forgotten to sell to the workbench, and steps closer.

"I was distracted at the store," he explains, watching for signs of malfunction in Hannibal's features as well as in the gentle tremors his machine was emitting, "That took longer than expected. Were you worried I'd leave?"

He adds the gentle question at the end and is almost relieved when Hannibal turns to him at the words. Outwardly, he just blinks and raises his eyebrows a little.

"I've never just left, Hannibal."

"Not that you'd leave," Hannibal is drawn out of the threat of freeze slowly, and his first movements beyond lack some of his normal pace but slowly he eases into his norm again, though for a moment he reaches up, his hand going toward the panel at the back of his own neck and briefly the fingers almost claw there, hard enough that they'd have left red marks if

his skin was reactive and real, but he masks it as a facsimile of nervousness, a gesture that indicates something new to him.

"I didn't want you to be in trouble," Hannibal admits. "Not knowing the cause of your delay, I... am not quite sure what happened. It hasn't before. I became convinced you needed help."

And that Hannibal, at home and unaware of Will's location, was unable to render it.

Will's eyes search his face and widen, if a little. A distant part of his mind he can't tamp down is ecstatic; the chip works, it emulates actual emotion, the 'feelings' are identical, there are just no logical reasons behind such feelings. And there aren't for humans either. Will holds his breath with that knowledge, the knowledge of that success.

But he can still see the worry – fear, confusion, helplessness – rendered in clear lines over Hannibal's face and it physically hurts to leave him that way, to leave that expression there without soothing it, calming him down to his neutral, his standby.

"I wasn't in trouble," he tells him, tone lowered into gentleness as one would with a child frightened by something for the first time. "I'm fine," he reassures.

But Hannibal's expression doesn't clear as easily as it should, there's something more there, something underneath the initial all-consuming terror that had gripped him hard enough to nearly shut down. And without thinking Will reaches out to gently take Hannibal's hand and press it against his heart beat.

"See?" Hannibal may have no heart beat of his own, may only know it as a concept – the earlier models had very basic first aid modules in their hard drive, for emergencies – but the constant rhythm had to be reassuring, if Will's words were not enough. "I'm fine."

Hannibal's attention goes where it is focused, onto the beating heart that was so important to continued human existence, and his fingers curl under Will's, gentle, as if to be certain. Hannibal seems faintly soothed by it, and then lost again momentarily, before he goes further. He touches Will's neck and feels the pulse there, then his cheek for the heat, and finally he seems reassured.

"I'm glad," Hannibal answers, though he can't be. Logically, he had known Will was alright the moment he'd walked in, but then the suggestion of relief onto his system had been just as alarming, just as new. It was that he had almost stuck on.

Hannibal doesn't know how to express the rest, it's not in his verbal repertoire and he only has what contact he's learned from Will, so eventually he leaves off, his expression softening, and he apologizes for his reaction. "Let me take the bags," he offers, slowly trying to reorient to normality.

Will does, watching him settle into a routine of putting groceries away, setting out the meat on a tray before putting it into the fridge. Just small things that seem to ease Hannibal back into his efficient functioning as Will watches, still feels the phantom pressure of cool soft fingers against his skin.

He thinks back to the evening before.

“I never taught you touch.” Will says after a while, implying the concept of reaching out for comfort, not the physical aspect that Hannibal had never needed to be taught.

“Why do you see it as reassurance?”

Hannibal hears the statement, and then the question, and he tilts his head as he processes it in two parts, to find a response to both. The first he finds difficulty in responding to, out of a need to contradict Will, but he does so carefully.

"You did teach me," Hannibal says, setting everything where it belongs in the fridge - neat and ready to be accessed in the order that he would require it. The concept is difficult. "Even when it was unnecessary you were gentle, though then it only affected you."

Hannibal seems to find it at last. "You touched me to reassure yourself," Hannibal says at last, as if striking a victory, and he smiles. "I finally understand that when I did not touch you back it must have felt empty. Before that, it never felt necessary to reach out, simply that at points I should, because it was what humans did."

"Now there are sensations," Hannibal concludes, and he looks down at his own fingertips in consideration, running his thumb in a smooth motion over each. "Rather than input."

Will listens, stumped for a moment by the sheer depth of the answer. It had never occurred to him that when he sought his own comfort by being gentle with Hannibal, by treating him as close to human as he could, that Hannibal had been taking the information in, storing it, in his own way understanding it.

And the strange tug is back, as it had been the night before, as it had started when Hannibal had settled in bed with him just to be close, to run his fingers over Will’s face and feel him there.

“When I didn’t touch you back,” Will asks quietly, waiting for Hannibal to look up, to seek back in his mind to the last time he had touched Will, “Did it feel empty?”

Hannibal's answer is nearly instant. "No," he says. There is no proper way to describe how full it felt. "Your eyes closed, your heat changed, your breath reacted. It felt full."

His features struggle with the expression, tugging toward confused, and finding uncertain, and Hannibal abruptly drops his hands against the countertop instead, leaning back as if he were tired, though he has hours to go before he requires recharging. He is simply overwhelmed, momentarily by the intensity of whatever it was he was feeling - or the fact that he was feeling at all, processing as close as he could to doing it at the very least.

"You asked me to stop," Hannibal recalls at last, and then ventures, "Because you don't need me to?"

Will shakes his head and closes his eyes against this for the moment. There is still the barrier of incomprehension, and that is something that Will would not be able to fix regardless of

adjustments, or newer and better and smarter. It's the ability to read subtle nuance, to take meaning from it and understand all the levels implied.

No machine can do that. Machines work with input, they work with data. Sometimes near-infinite amounts of it but data that is provided, that is learned, that is embedded. They do not have it innately and something that most humans take for granted, claim to not have, to not understand, is not something that is able to be taught. There was just too much.

And perhaps that's it, what has stilled Will's hand in adjusting Hannibal in such a way, for such a purpose; that he cannot understand. He can emulate, he can remember, can mimic, but he cannot understand.

"I asked you to stop," Will agrees, drops his hand from his face and takes a breath before opening his eyes to look at Hannibal again, "Because you are more to me than a mechanism. And I don't want to use you like a Sybian, I don't need –" he stops, letting out the breath in a quick huff of air.

"I can't," he says finally, and it's the start of something more, his throat clicks and for a moment he says nothing. Then he continues, "I can't make you. And I don't want to."

Hannibal cannot reconcile the two statements into coherency - that William could not make him, but still didn't want to. The answer required only the latter, and Hannibal would have accepted it, but the former implied an irreparable loop in logic.

"You do not make me cook," Hannibal suggests instead, "It's my function. But you ask me to perform outside of it already."

To converse, to apply humor and understanding in his own limited way. "You have asked me in the past what I wanted. Ask me now."

Hannibal lays it out - an echo of words in the past days, but when he tries to reconcile himself to accept the answer something new sparks in him that he seems unable to deal with. Will is gripped with the certainty that for a moment, before some internal logic circuit blows, that Hannibal is gripped with pain at his failure. And then he does freeze dead still, trying to work through another of Will's challenges for him with everything he has. He eases into utter stillness.

Will closes his eyes, then closes them tighter and rubs gentle fingers against the lids before sighing and dropping his hand. He considers for a long time what to do. Whether he should use this to his advantage, remove the chip for good, perhaps wipe short term memory of this encounter, of the one the night before.

He knows he should, in good conscience, do exactly that. Remove the chip that's causing Hannibal to malfunction, to hurt in a way a machine is not meant to. He should recalibrate him and take out all the components that did not belong there, that hindered him in being passive and calm and efficient in his work. He should give him up. he shouldn't seek to build a bomb, shouldn't seek to prove how simple it would be with just blueprints to work with. He should bow to the inevitable and upgrade, watch Hannibal be taken for parts; the android wouldn't know what was happening, nor care, if all the chips were removed.

And Will finds himself walking closer to where Hannibal stands, hands quick to check for any physical malfunction, before they seek the main power switch and set Hannibal's system to reboot, waiting for the eyes to clear, blink and focus, for the gentle smile at the sight of Will to appear on Hannibal's features before the memory can boot fast enough to remind him of why he'd shut down.

"What do you want?" Will asks in lieu of a greeting, and his voice sounds so achingly desperate he knows that his good conscience is about to be marred.

Hannibal reaches - on instinct, on drives that he shouldn't have, to do something that he has never been taught, and he pulls Will close to him, settles his arms around him and tips his head to one side to press his cheek against Will's and push there, gently.

Memory boots, slowly, the question penetrating the haze of startup and recall. Hannibal holds him gently, as if he were made of glass, and his arms are situated awkwardly perhaps, but he does not let go.

"I don't know," he admits, "But I don't want to have to stop."

He shifts until the hold is somewhat more comfortable, until it is natural. "I want to give you what you ask and what you don't want to ask."

Will goes against him, leaves his hands by his sides but presses close into the welcoming, safe gesture until his heart stops hammering quite so loudly and he can ease his breathing back to a semblance of calm. He resigns himself to falling past his own morals; he'd given Hannibal the ability to ask, to seek, to counter and argue, and he wouldn't do him the disservice of ignoring it when he used it so blatantly.

"I want you to touch me like you did before." He says quietly, extricating himself out of Hannibal's hold just enough to see him, to look him in the eyes as he asks, feels his face darken with the knowledge of what he's doing, what he's asking, and who.

"I won't make you stop."

"You can," Hannibal assures him. He will always listen, of course. He is watching the changes come over Will's features, and he lifts his hands to ease the backs of his fingers against Will's reddening cheeks gently, as if to soothe the blush away.

He reaches down and takes up one of Will's hands from his side, lifting it between both of his own and touching slow - carefully over the bandage that covers the gash, and then up, sliding his fingers against each of Will's in slow exploration, as if it were as new as the first time he'd touched Will - and perhaps it is.

Hannibal touches each rough callous, every roughened fingertip pad, and all the spaces between his fingers with slow reverence, eyes down before he looks up in response to Will's rapid breathing. "Is that alright?"

Will answers only by threading his fingers with Hannibal's and pressing them together, joined palm to palm. He leans closer and ducks his head under Hannibal's chin, nuzzling

lightly against him, bringing his other hand up to press against the soft hair at the back of his head, threading his fingers through it.

He smiles when the motion is mirrored against him, feeling his shoulders loosen, some of the tension falling away. It is a willing gesture, as willing as one can be without being truly sentient, and Will finds himself pressing closer, drawing their joined hands to press between them, Hannibal's turned to touch his chest, his own against Hannibal's. No heart beat. A gentle hum of machinery but nothing more.

Will lets go and steps back, tugging Hannibal to follow so they leave the kitchen, Will stumbling a little and feeling Hannibal catch him to balance him, one hand curled in the front of his shirt, the other coming up to support his shoulder. They don't quite make it past the barrier separating the kitchen from the workbench – Hannibal's head coming up just a second too late to avoid Will's back colliding with it – but by that point it doesn't matter. Will presses back against the flat surface, watches Hannibal attempt to stop before they ended up too close and meets him halfway.

The kiss is unusual - Hannibal's mouth is dry at first, but soft and yielding and he makes a sound that's the start of a question before he thinks the better of it. It's utterly new to him, as Hannibal attempts to arrange himself to balance and keep his weight off of Will, without having to draw away. At first his mouth just yields, open and pliant and eventually - slowly - wet, as Will's mouth leaves enough behind and Hannibal begins to learn.

He responds slowly at first, and then Will coaxes him faster, into something sliding and sweet, and Hannibal's hands come up into his hair gently as if he knew it was exactly the right thing to do. It goes on and on, soft and responsive, until Will realizes he's dizzy from it - Hannibal had no need to break for breath, and Will has to stop the kiss to chuckle at his own forgetfulness.

He finds Hannibal answering with a smile, with gentle touches to his hair, with a finger pressing curiously against his mouth again, now that he knows it so much more intimately. Then he leans to repeat the motion, when he feels Will's breath has slowed enough.

It's almost too easy, to slide his hands over Hannibal's shoulders and rest them there, to go pliant in turn just to see how much Hannibal has remembered to mirror. It's fascinating and dizzying and it feels good, and Will finds himself responding with quiet sounds and gentle pressure for Hannibal to move closer until they're pressed tight – Hannibal warming from Will's shifting and touches – in the corner of the small kitchen.

When Will breaks the kiss this time he splays his hand on Hannibal's chest, just holding him there, at bay but not pushing him away. He slides his back against the wall and past it, walking back slowly to watch Hannibal follow until they're further into the apartment, past the workbench and towards the corner where Will sleeps.

It's not so much impact as overbalance; when Hannibal gets close enough to Will to pull him in again, distracted with the possibility of kissing him again, hearing his breathing hitch like it had before, Will stumbles enough to sit down heavily on the corner of his bed and subsequently pull Hannibal with him. it's an amusing tangle, and Will laughs quietly, at the absurdity of it and the absurdity of how normal it feels when it shouldn't. Hannibal's hands

rest on either side of Will where he'd caught himself and he watches for a moment, gauging the response, before smiling back and leaning close again with this new position and balance.

Hannibal has settled on his knees, his hands braced on the mattress on either side of Will's legs, and for a moment he looks up as Will curls his hands at the back of Hannibal's neck, on the verge of drawing him up higher, but something in the expression stills him for a moment.

Hannibal looks up at him, settled as he is on the floor, and for a long time they have eye contact, Will's hands gently resting against Hannibal's neck where it bends to look up. He realizes, after a moment, that what's fascinated Hannibal is what he had been looking for with the other android - he looks up, meets Will's gaze, and is suddenly unerringly aware that the man is alive, and the full scope of everything Will is awes him briefly.

Hannibal does not quite touch with reverence, but his fingers stay gentle as they trail lines up Will's chest, as he lets himself be drawn up onto the bed in slow, careful motions that cautiously keep his weight from settling on Will, and now the kisses are brief and less strange, heated with borrowed temperature. Hannibal holds his weight above Will on bent elbows and knees, one settled between Will's thighs, the other braced wide on the small space.

Will's hands come up and for a moment he has no idea what to do with them. Hannibal doesn't respond as a person would, doesn't bend lightly when someone runs their hands over a particularly ticklish spot on their stomach, doesn't roll his weight down into soft touches seeking more friction. He's more or less still, curious and willing, but still.

So Will moves his hands how he wishes hands were moved over him; draws them up the outside of Hannibal's arms and over his shoulders, draws one down his spine and to the curve of his back before splaying the hand and sliding it back up, his other settles is Hannibal's hair again and very lightly tugs, enough to move him.

It doesn't take long for Hannibal to follow the unspoken instructions in mimic, though it's difficult to be quite as graceful when balance is an issue. Regardless, Will smiles at him, arches his back up, tilts his head back with a quiet sigh when Hannibal's fingers tug him to move. His own hands slide around to the front, skimming the backs of knuckles up Hannibal's chest and down it. as Hannibal leans closer, Will draws up one knee and pushes down against the leg between his own. Another quiet sound, brows briefly drawn together, and Will bites his lip as he lets Hannibal respond how he believes he should.

After a moment, Hannibal leans into the touch against his chest, increasing the pressure - seeking the contact and sensation now that he has come to terms with it, and one of his hands insinuates itself between Will and the mattress, stroking that same long line along the man's spine as Will had done a moment before - perhaps catching onto the game of demonstrating what he wanted by suggesting how good it felt.

He seems to like the contact, focusing on it as much as Will was every touch. His eyes never waver from Will's face, and Will realizes that Hannibal will always have the advantage of focus. Hannibal feels Will arch up again, and this time he moves into it, shifts to give Will just a little more pressure against him.

Hannibal shifts them both, settling onto his side so that he can both pull Will closer and free up both his hands without fear of putting too much weight on Will, and spreads both his palms broad against Will's lower back and pulls him against him, and then - sighs a long pleasured sound that has a subtlety he certainly didn't learn from the Sybian.

"Don't let me hurt you," he asks, as his fingers push just a little more firmly against Will's back, hesitating on the point of asking for guidance or permission - or both.

The sound sends sensation skittering down Will's spine much like Hannibal's fingers had been before, and he returns it, ducking his head to watch his own hands slide over Hannibal's sides and down to rest against his hips. He nods shakily in reply before pressing his lips to the smooth line of Hannibal's throat. It occurs to him suddenly that he will not leave any marks on Hannibal, but the same may not be true for him. he smiles against him and pulls back his lips farther to lightly scrape his teeth over the skin.

After that, it becomes much harder to concentrate or set events in order. Will knows that Hannibal's hands never stop moving against him, never cease in their gentle pressure and barely-there teasing, he knows that at one point, Hannibal draws his head back, fingers tight but not painful in Will's hair, and mirrors the motion of lips against skin, exactly where Will had shown him. he knows that his body is a constant movement of slow undulations, moving closer to Hannibal until he can get the friction he desires, and his sounds change to lower, deeper things filled with need and pleasure.

He knows that at one point he catches Hannibal's hand, running his thumb over the warm palm, and draws it down to press against him.

Hannibal is fascinated by the warm sensation of Will hardening against his palm, and he draws back to tuck his head and look down between them at what he's doing, his hand under Will's own as Will pushes needily against the yielding skin along the back of Hannibal's hand and pushes down the notion that he had set it there himself just a few days past.

He glances upward briefly, to be certain he has permission as he undoes the button on Will's pants, and Will gets a hand between Hannibal and his own pants to work the Zipper down for fear that Hannibal's deliberate, slow care will undo him even before they are really touching, skin on skin.

He thinks Hannibal is watching the reaction, fascinated by the evident biology and clear effect he's having on Will, but after the first few tentative strokes Will is only aware of the pressure and sweetness of the touch, of his own voice streaming out of him thin and high and Hannibal actually hesitates at the sound before Will grips his fingers tight so he doesn't pull them away, trying to form his reassurances into a whole sentence, and something in the urgency of his tone convinces Hannibal he hasn't hurt Will.

At first he touches in pure exploration, and then he repeats where he had found reaction, and Will would laugh - would feel some victory at the notion of exploration - of being explored, in fact, if it didn't feel so damn good and if he hadn't done it in so long it took all Will's focus just to keep himself together.

Will shifts, enough to lie on his back and drape his arms up over his head with another gentle sound and arch of his back. Hannibal is meticulous, slow and careful and more willing to experiment with pressure and speed now that Will has stopped issuing anything but whimpers at his touch. At one point, Hannibal's rhythm eases, returns to simply touching, fingers careful and sure, and it takes Will a moment to realize that he's still mirroring, still copying Will's careful gestures, but these were not ever used on Hannibal.

It gives him a moment to catch his breath, try to ease his mind to some sort of clarity, but it lasts only long enough for him to reach over and kiss Hannibal again, shifting when the other pauses to reciprocate, to straddle him instead and push closer; no danger of Hannibal crushing him this way, and it would take much more than Will's pliant weight to do the android damage.

"What can I give you?" he asks breathlessly, when Hannibal's hand returns to the delicious rhythm of before, his eyes half-closed as he watches Will and mimics the expression. "What can I do?"

Hannibal makes a soft sound, not quite a shush to ease the guilt growing in Will. "What haven't you given me?" he asks, softly. When Will lifts his hands to Hannibal's face, he turns his cheek into it, letting his eyes slide closed as he continues his rhythm, tireless and soft, with a light pressure that will push Will over eventually, but gives him relief enough to know he'll take a little while longer. The sensation is unusual, Hannibal's skin is smooth, not at all roughened, but he has found that if he works his fingers and thumb over the head it leaves Will gripping him tighter and nearly breathless for air.

"What haven't you done?" Hannibal continues philosophically, and teasing Will right to the edge before he gives an answer that Will finds useful. "Keep touching me," Hannibal asks, "I can feel it."

By pressure, input, by sliding and motion, all translated into his version of sensation, and just as reassuring that he existed - that he took up space and interacted with life, even if he himself could not have it.

So Will does, pulling back for just a moment to catch his breath before bringing his lips to Hannibal's forehead, slowly drawing them down his nose before shifting to nuzzle gently against him as Hannibal changes the angle of his hand just slightly and draws Will's lips open in a wide, trembling 'o'. it feels incredible, and Will is embarrassingly close.

His hands draw under Hannibal's back and over his shoulders, fingers curling slightly to draw lines down his back through the shirt he's wearing, lips poised just over Hannibal's as he pants quiet sounds and meaningless words against him. he feels Hannibal's free hand draw up the outside of his thigh, curl against his ass and move higher still, over his back and up to the back of his neck, pulling Will down to quiet him, perhaps to reassure.

What hadn't he done. He hadn't hurt Hannibal, had never damaged him or mistreated him, he'd gotten him from a family who had recently upgraded and paid for those repairs in trade. He'd gotten him undamaged but not taken care of, had replaced a lot of the skin that had damaged with tiny minor burns and spills that had never been cleaned. He'd taught Hannibal

to mimic, updated his software and added his own. He'd patiently gotten him through curiosity, through sarcasm and expression, and now he was showing him compassion.

What hadn't he done but bring Hannibal so high that the fall would hurt more?

If the cliff was in view, Hannibal was only slowly becoming aware that he should fear it. And here, in this moment, he gives no sign of worry at all. It's possible he won't truly understand that he should even in the very last moments, and that is almost what Will fears worst of all, until he forgets to think at all with Hannibal tirelessly coaxing him onward, taking his cues from Will himself - not just his voice but his past in a way that should make him color with embarrassment again, but he can't bring himself to care.

Not with Hannibal coaxing him on gently but ceaselessly, until Will can't resist it anymore and he forgets to keep his own hands in motion and instead just holds on, his hands gripping tight to Hannibal's shoulders and finding them steel firm and shifting still, as his voice goes high and tight with release, as he scolds Hannibal not to stop, that he isn't hurting when he hesitates, and then has to reach between them to cover Hannibal's hand and still it at last so he can catch his breath when it's over.

Hannibal touches gently in fascination afterward, his hands sticky with Will's release as he explores the trembling muscles inside Will's thighs, the sheen of sweat low on his belly, the other signs of his enjoyment, before he lifts his hand and presses the palm flat over Will's heart to feel it slow to a normal pulse.

Will's eyes are closed, lips parted to breathe as he comes down from the high he's riding, feels Hannibal still gently touch him, press against his chest to feel him, alive and pleased, and leans down to kiss him again. Distantly he wonders why this had taken him so long; the compassion chip, this particular brand of enjoyment… Freddie was right in one thing, at least, he would never shame Hannibal in a way a Sybian would be, he would never physically adjust him. he thinks suddenly of the part he hadn't sold, still on his workbench and laughs, pressing close in the afterglow.

Hannibal is a marvel of steadiness, pulling Will closer still, into utter relaxation against his chest, and seems content to stay just so until something forces them to move - either Will's need to be doing something, or his imperatives kicking in.

Will wonders if he should thank Hannibal. One wouldn't with a person, but he had grown used to accepting his actions as legitimate and wanted if he was thanked for them. Will pulls back far enough to meet Hannibal's eyes, to watch as they slowly focus back on him, coming back from wherever Hannibal's concentration had lapsed, wherever he'd directed his memory and processes for the moment. Will smiles. After a brief moment, Hannibal blinks at him and smiles back.

"Thank you." Will tells him, voice quiet but words genuine and soft, grateful, and somehow underlined with sadness. He licks his lips. "I'll clean you up," he assures, "And then I suppose I should help making dinner."

He grins to see if Hannibal will respond to the jest.

The responding expression is exactly perfect in its wryness, dry and yet still amused beneath the bland disbelief. Hannibal smooths his hands over Will's back in a long line, rubbing them against his shoulders through his shirt.

"There are a limit to how many miracles I can perform in a day," Hannibal says, mildly, but he smiles brightly and pulls Will down for a last kiss before he shifts beneath him. "You can consider cleaning me up as your part."

If Will was actually interested in engaging his teaching function, Hannibal would amend himself to allow it, but Will's prior efforts to help had always been more hindrance, if only because the space in the Kitchen was so small at the least, and at the most because Will was so unpracticed. Hannibal was, after all, made for it.

Will just laughs, still high off the pleasure, before moving to get up, allowing Hannibal to do the same. He watches as he stands slowly, allows the equilibrium centers to recalibrate, before tilting his head and turning to look at Will, as though just waiting for instruction or company. Will waves him off, gesturing that he will join him soon and clean him as promised, and when Hannibal turns away, pulls his shirt over his head and tosses it into the laundry basket.

If he ever slips and allows this again, he will need to somehow make Hannibal understand that he shouldn’t clean his hands over Will’s back after, even in a gesture of comfort.

It’s almost absurdly funny, and it takes a lot for Will to bite his tongue, do his jeans up again and retrieve a new shirt to slide over his skin before he goes to the kitchen. Hannibal is waiting patiently, not starting the usual routine of washing his hands as he could have, since Will had asked him to wait. It’s a strange sort of obedience, with Hannibal seeming to tolerate Will’s attempts at offering something in return when he feels nothing is necessary.

Cleaning Hannibal up doesn’t take long, but Will remembers his words, remembers that he can feel him when he touches him, that he seems to enjoy the concept of that sensation. So Will draws his fingers over the wet skin over and over as he washes it clean, curls them between Hannibal’s own, draws his thumb over the smooth pads of Hannibal’s fingers as Hannibal is so fond of doing himself. When they finish, Will dries his hands and lightly draws his lips over the smooth knuckles.

When they finish, Will dries his hands and lightly draws his lips over the smooth knuckles.

The fingers flex into the gesture, as they had all the others. Hannibal's hands have become softly responsive, easing into touch with gentle motions that welcome it. He turns his hand gently to press two fingers against Will's mouth, before Will draws back lest they undo all their cleanup again.

“I won’t hinder you in making dinner.” He tells him gently, giving him another smile before setting the towel down on the counter and returning to his workbench.

"You're never a hindrance," Hannibal says gently, and then settles nearly seamlessly into humor. "At most, a slight inefficiency."

He doesn't argue, however, processing Will at his workstation and seeming to accept that all was well with the world. With them both working, as was the usual, it almost feels normal - the sounds of Hannibal in the kitchen lulling Will as he works on a rough schematic, and tries not to let go of the relaxation he'd been given.

For a time, there is quiet and peace, before Hannibal nudges him gently to come and eat, and slips the question in curious, subtle, "What are you working on?"

Will is tempted to lie, but he has never lied to Hannibal before. Never about what he was giving him as new upgrades, never about what the changes could mean, he hadn't even lied about the Sybian, simply phrased his replies in such a way as to avoid particularly awkward conversations. He sits back and taps his pencil against the tabletop. He would scan the designs in, of course, but digital work could be deleted, if the government so chose. They would not be quite as lucky in getting rid of his hand-drawn work.

"I'm testing a theory," he tells him, "Of whether or not it is possible to create a robot-proof bomb." He chews his lip lightly and sets the pencil down, letting his fingers linger on the wood a moment longer before pulling them away.

Not a lie, but not the whole truth. He is working to see if there is any way to save Hannibal as his, he wants to see if there is any way to help him avoid the fate Freddie Lounds has in store for him. The thought makes him feel ill and he wonders for a moment if Hannibal remembers all her words, if the memory had wiped during his processing error or if he had kept it, just never accessed it again.

Concern forms slowly on Hannibal's features. Androids are programmed - all of them - with trigger phrases and words. They were selective of course in what they monitored and recorded to possibly report later, if a crime was actually committed, a person's assistive android could become key evidence. Will sees Hannibal hesitate - likely forcibly shutting down the recording process that was trying to spring up.

Hannibal sets Will's dinner down, and then crouches at the other corner of the small table in the kitchen, looking up at Will, having faith in him that he'll have a reason for wanting to do so. "Why?"

Perhaps the memory isn't there after all - or perhaps he hasn't recalled it, as whatever processes were involved had caused a hard freeze. It was possible it was set aside for review and reform at a later point, or perhaps his memory had dumped entire. Will doesn't know, if that's the case, how much he remembers at all. Perhaps he has forgotten Ms. Lounds entirely - Will wishes he had the luxury.

Will purses his lips. He doesn't quite have as simple an evasion for this question as he had for the other.

"The government is recalling all Hannibal models for destruction." he says finally, rubbing his eyes, "They are attempting to build a robot to send into the field to dismantle bombs, avoid unnecessary loss of life. They don't want anyone getting the idea of building a counter weapon, a bomb that resists what it is that's dismantling it."

He sighs and looks at Hannibal again. "They underestimate the underground. I can't be the only man who knows how you function. I'm selling my knowledge and warning for a favor in exchange. I'm hoping to complete the schematics by tomorrow morning. Have the parts necessary by tomorrow afternoon." he sits forward, hands clasped between his knees, "I don't plan to hurt anyone, I just need to prove a point. I need -"

He swallows and shakes his head, moving to rest his arms on the table instead before picking up his fork to start on dinner, commending Hannibal on a delicious meal, as always.

The information is taken in, processed, turned in Hannibal's mind until it triggers up a memory. Perhaps several. Will isn't entirely certain how much compassion has altered the way things link together, but Hannibal goes quiet, into reserve.

"You're trying to save me," Hannibal concludes, and then looks up again, as if suddenly aware he truly needed saving. He shakes his head slowly, and then reaches across the table, curls his fingers lightly over the backs of Will's wrists. "Don't put yourself in danger."

It was dangerous - it was just as likely they'd haul them both away with an idea like this, one as a relic that had outlived it's usefulness and one as a dangerous subversive, and really it would be up to the individual which was which.

"Please," Hannibal continues. "There must be another way."

"If there is we'll find it," Will tells him, "For now I have this. And it's all I have." he offers a very small smile and looks away, though he can't quite bring himself to tug his hand away, so he leaves it there and changes to using his fork with his other. He picks at his dinner, aware that Hannibal is still watching him, still settled on him without blinking, without moving, until Will looks up and hears him again, listens.

"I'm doing them a service," he says finally, but he doesn't believe his own words either, "Pointing out a simple but destructive flaw in their planning. They can't know how easy it is to make one. They underestimate the people they ignore."

He looks at Hannibal and for a moment doesn't blink either, lets his eyes fix on the ones in front of him, fascinated by the way they shift in and out of focus as they move from one of Will's eyes to the other, back and forth and back until Will blinks and Hannibal mirrors.

"Don't worry about me." he says finally.

"I have no one else to worry about," Hannibal answers, but he rises to his feet at last, resuming his usual processes with intent to clean the kitchen. "And now I have the capacity."

Chapter 6

Chapter by whiskeyandspite

Chapter Summary

> *He stands straight and still when Will tucks against him, and understands. Hannibal turns his head at the neck, utterly silent on his repaired tendon springs, and murmurs, "Don't take yourself apart," is his request, "I can't fight the way you can, but I won't let you undo yourself, either."*
>
> *The breath Hannibal simulates doesn't hitch, and he smooths his hands through Will's hair. "Don't trade. You are worth as much to me. More."*

Chapter Notes

> Merry Christmas. Thank you so much for sticking around!! More sentimentality at the end of the piece.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He rouses slowly the next morning, groggy and feeling heavy in every limb. Hannibal had settled at the very end of his charging cord, but it had not taken him all the way to the bed - just close enough to extend his hand onto it to maintain contact in whatever way he could through the night.

Will touches his hand, and decides to leave him powered down - out of kindness or perhaps, if he's honest with himself, shame - until he returns from the docks this morning. Perhaps until he is done creating the prototype. If he is successful, he will be trading hours for years he can hope, and if he fails, he is sparing them both a little pain.

He tugs on his shirt, and goes out without warm food or coffee to keep him company. He finds himself reaching for it on the way, then corrects himself when he remembers it won't be there in his satchel. He doesn't linger on the docks as he might on any other day, just in case something caught his eye.

Bev and Zeller are both ready to attend him, though Zeller is yawning in the early morning. Beverly looks as if she might have had one too many cups of coffee, and she grins to see Will, reaching beneath the counter to produce the results of his list.

Will passes a piece of folded paper in turn, raising his eyebrows to mirror Bev's in a silent exchange until she gets the idea and slides the slip into her pocket to peruse later. Will runs his fingers over the bag Bev has settled in front of him.

"How much did you get?"

"Are you kidding?" Bev grins, "Most of that stuff is as easy as asking in this place."

"The nuclear cells were harder," Zeller adds, stifling another yawn with the back of his hand, "But it was more a matter of finding what to trade than finding it at all. What do you need this stuff for anyway?"

"Leverage," Will replies, chewing the inside of his lip before taking up the bag with a quick thank you to both of them. He turns when Bev calls his name.

"Said you wouldn't forget, Graham."

Will smiles, tilting his head and letting his eyes flick to the pocket the paper rests in before returning them to Bev's. "I didn't."

And he leaves.

There has always been an unspoken rule on the docks, especially with those who dealt or worked there frequently enough to call it their legitimate business, that once their number was up, whatever they had that would be of most use to the docks, returned to it, one way or another. Will's trade had always been his skill, his ability to manipulate and adjust, change things just enough to barely notice, but make the most difference. The schematics were the most powerful thing anyone this side of the law could own.

It went without saying that they were also the most dangerous things to own, but he trusted Bev could be smart with them. It was poor insurance, perhaps, but there is something satisfactory in the thought of it as a revenge.

The transit home is faster, and Will enters his apartment to find it quiet, it seems cooler somehow without the small kitchen slightly warmer from cooking. Will sets his satchel down on his workbench and considers Hannibal, stretched partway across the mattress to reach across the space for Will even in his absence, features eased in his version of sleep. Will wonders if he dreams, in his own way.

For a moment, Will wonders if it would be kinder not to wake him until the ordeal was over, until he had either succeeded or failed, and if he failed not to wake him at all, but he is suddenly seized with the certainty that life can't go on without the rhythm of Hannibal in it.

Selfish, perhaps, but if he only had days left then he would have them with Hannibal. He crouches and strokes the back of Hannibal's neck gently, until the power sequence activates and Hannibal blinks himself slowly through startup.

"Good morning," Will says, feeling some strange blend of sadness and overwhelming affection when the dark eyes fix on his, and Hannibal draws his extended limb in to reach for

Will's hand instead.

"Good morning, William," Hannibal answers, and he curls both his hands around one of Will's and presses his lips to the backs of his knuckles, as Will had the evening before, observing, "You've been out."

"It was a quick errand," he doesn't deny it, "I suppose I can surrender, now, to your demands I eat breakfast."

Another smile, and Will finds himself wont to pull his hand from between Hannibal's. It's pathetic and childish but Will finds himself not caring. Not right then.

"I have a personal project," he says, "but it won't hinder me if you would like to keep me company."

Hannibal clearly remembers his personal project, but he holds his judgment as unasked for. After a moment, he rises, and Will gets up with him. Hannibal does not lean to kiss him, but he does pull Will close, and slide his hands down the man's lower back, turning his cheek against the top of Will's head and taking a moment of contact, all for his own.

"Breakfast," He reminds - perhaps himself - and steps back, moving into his routine after politely coiling the charging cable away where no one would trip on it, and leaving Will to work on his project.

Breakfast comes quickly, Hannibal opting for a classic - eggs, sausage, toast, jam, and Will finds the timing difficult for the delicate work - and again when Hannibal interrupts shortly after, demanding attention in a strange way with conversation. It takes Will an almost embarrassingly long time, and Hannibal's hands settling heavily, much welcomed on his shoulders, to realize he is being distracted.

"What you're doing," Will murmurs, rolling his shoulders in a comfortable stretch, feeling Hannibal's fingers grip a little tighter, remembering the pressure from before, "Stop it."

He has simply started with the structure, deciding that once that's finished he can work in the dangerous and delicate injection of the nuclear core. If he has to set Hannibal to sleep for that he will, but he won't let his only plan blow them both up - and half the apartment building with them.

He sighs, when the caresses don't cease, and closes his eyes.

"Why are you so against me building this?"

"It's dangerous to build it in the first place," Hannibal answers, rubbing until the muscles ease beneath his fingers into remembered looseness. He simulates a deep breath, and then eases his fingers up into Will's hair, feathering them gently through the strands.

"They'll arrest you," Hannibal continues, and it's half a question. "And when you succeed you'll be placing human life in danger, if no robot can disarm it."

"It shouldn't exist. I don't want to trade my existence for human life. I can't want that," Hannibal draws back at last, soothing his hand softly along Will's shoulders before he settles into his usual chair and looks up at Will in quiet misery. "I don't want you to be alone, either."

There is another sentence in Hannibal, but he holds it. Will realizes that he is concerned for his own existence at last, perhaps faintly scared - and he does not even properly remember Freddie, if he could even have comprehended her threat in the first place.

“I have backup if they arrest me.” Will murmurs, but he knows it’s not what Hannibal wants to hear. It’s not what Will wants to be saying. He watches Hannibal’s face twist with emotions that were never meant to be written there and reaches out to smooth his hand gently through his hair and down to cup his jaw.

“If I do nothing, I will be alone.” He says. He draws his thumb lightly over and over Hannibal’s cheekbone and watches his eyes widen but no other words leave him. he looks completely distraught and it’s burning Will in a way he never suspected it could.

“If you’re frightened I can take the chip away,” he says quietly, “Take the capacity for that feeling away, you won’t have to suffer it.”

"I'm frightened for you, William," Hannibal says, "as much as me."

For all that, though, he doesn't ask William to take it out. Simple - logical and easy as it would be to return to a state where he wouldn't worry, he also would exist in a void of everything Will seemed to value in him the most as of lately. He would forget how to want, at the same time.

Hannibal smooths his features under Will's touch, and with a start, William realizes that he is trying to teach himself how to lie - an innocent lie, the selfless one that suggests everything is alright.

Reaching up, Hannibal takes Will's hand and looks down at it, palm up in his own. "Couldn't you create a better design instead?" he asks. "For the hands, I mean."

It would require more time than Will had, and testing, trial and error he couldn't afford. Destruction was easy but creation... that was a different story. Hannibal understands without being answered, reads it from the expressions on Will's face and then nods once, and rises. "I can't stop you," he says, without anger. "Please be careful."

Will swallows and finds himself standing as well.

“You can,” he says, waiting for Hannibal to understand, “You can stop me, you want to, that’s the only reason I’m fighting so hard.”

He lets the words settle, runs his hands through his hand hard before dropping them to his sides and immediately folding them.

“You have been the only constant in my life since I was a child. You haven’t left.” He shrugs, “Even now when you have the option to, you don’t. it’s not even that you would have

nowhere to go, you just don’t even think about leaving. It’s unusual for me, I don’t have constants.”

He looks up and chews his lip again. when he shrugs this time it’s more helpless, arms out wide before hitting his sides lightly as he lets out a breath.

“You probably have no idea how much you mean to me. You are not a machine to me, you’re a companion. You listen, even when you didn’t understand, you never went out of focus and pretended, you were there. You put up with me, day in and day out and you still have gentle words to say to me, even though I’ve given you not only ample opportunity but practice to be nasty with your words.”

Will swallows and looks away.

“And when someone comes here and tells me that it is their deepest desire to take you apart,” his voice cracks and he clears his throat before continuing, “And undo you from the very foundations of what you are, believe me I will fight with everything I have for that not to happen.”

Hannibal reaches for him, in a clear moment of humanity, and Will goes. There's no heartbeat when he settles against the android's chest, no pulse, no sign of life but the soft touch of Hannibal's hands against his shoulder, and the way he touches Will gently - not because Will is delicate, but because Hannibal is worried about using too much of his strength.

He stands straight and still when Will tucks against him, and understands. Hannibal turns his head at the neck, utterly silent on his repaired tendon springs, and murmurs, "Don't take yourself apart," is his request, "I can't fight the way you can, but I won't let you undo yourself, either."

The breath Hannibal simulates doesn't hitch, and he smooths his hands through Will's hair. "Don't trade. You are worth as much to me. More."

Will makes a sound and draws back enough to kiss Hannibal again, perhaps to make him stop talking, perhaps to cement what he’s saying, what they both are, regardless the kiss this time is returned in a way that makes Will melt, and gentle shivers run down his back. He hums against Hannibal and draws his hands over his back harshly enough to tug the fabric of his shirt tightly against him.

They have two days, he has no time for this, but all Will wants is to melt into this and see how much more he can teach Hannibal, and Hannibal him. and it’s pathetic and sad and a part of him is disgusted with himself that he’s allowing this, a part remembers that he has the mechanism he has yet to sell on his table… he slots the idea away and pulls back to gasp a breath – Hannibal, of course, doesn’t need one.

“Why?” he asks, addressing Hannibal’s last words quietly.

"You have always expected more of me," Hannibal answers, "Even when I didn't have it to give."

Will has always been polite to Hannibal, always challenged him to find new ways of reacting, of processing situations. Hannibal rests his weight back against the edge of the workbench, so that he can take more of Will's weight, one knee settling between Will's.

Hannibal touches Will's face gently, along the line of his jaw, and then explores the soft skin beneath. "Others detach themselves because it is easier. You don't treat me like the Crawfords do or... anyone else."

Will hasn't distanced himself from Hannibal to make the thought that he was only a machine bearable. His scope of existence was limited, the way he saw the world was smaller, in theory.

"Rather than lowering yourself, you sought to bring me up," Hannibal continues, and he leans in to kiss Will again, gently, quickly this time. "Thank you."

Will smiles, leaning into him more, and allows the words, allows the gentle touches and the closeness and perhaps, selfishly, allows himself to stifle the voice at the back of his mind that discounts this as desperate and wrong. He knows it's both, morally. And he knows that Hannibal must be suffering as he is, with this chip in him, overloading his systems enough to power him down faster, to cause him to freeze, to confuse and hurt and worry him; he isn't made for that. He's a machine made to cook and clean and work with his hands, not to allow such depth of thinking. And for that Will feels guilty.

"This is why I'm doing it," he says, rolling his hips forward just a little and ducking his head to press it against Hannibal's chest, to feel the way his hand automatically goes to rest against the side of Will's head and cradle him close with the gesture.

"Because as I sought to bring you up they will seek to destroy you, systematically, meticulously, because they can.

Shh, shh, you're still useful...

If there's one thing that remains inhuman about Hannibal, it's his inability to understand why a person would undo something that operated. But they undid each other at nearly every opportunity, and seemed to find their utmost inspiration in getting their claws into another creature and tearing it asunder.

"Because I no longer operate as I was intended?" Hannibal asks, trying to find a reason. "Or because I'm dangerous to their plans?

For all of Will's compunctions on the matter of physicality, Hannibal welcomes it, even as he continues to speak - he will always have the ability to retain clarity, even as Will sinks his fingers under Hannibal's lapels and the android slides his other hand low on Will's back to encourage, then lower to lift him into his next motion.

"You said they couldn't without your permission," Hannibal remembers. "Is this what that means?"

Will makes a breathless sound against him and wonders if there's anything he can do to set Hannibal's mind to blank, just for this, just long enough.

"My permission extends as far as my possession," he says, ducking his head to gently press his lips against the cool skin at Hannibal's throat as he closes his eyes and allows the slow burn to build, "Once they take you from it, my permission goes with it."

He can't give him a reason for why. There is no why. Why exists to no one when they see only progress and none of their humanity in the machines they have so carefully created. the one thing humanity has never evolved out of is its inescapable desire to hurt itself and watch itself rise up from another failure. A strange, sick game.

Hannibal accepts this quietly, though it must worry him - with his new capacity to worry, and his ability to consider himself, if only in how he cares for Will. He has learned to measure himself by a strange scale, his presence in Will's life his proof perfect that he exists in reality at all.

Will is grateful for the few minutes of silence, for Hannibal shifting his weight so that he can slide his hand between them instead, where Will is growing hard against Hannibal's leg. For once, Hannibal accepts that a change of subject might be the best course, instead of expecting Will to continue on such serious matters as his breath speeds and his heart rate increases, his fingers locking in the fabric of Hannibal's shirt almost desperately as Hannibal strokes him through his pants, at the pressure he himself sets by pushing into it and against Hannibal's thigh at the same time.

"Will you show me what you want this time?" Hannibal asks at last, with his voice pitched low. "I know what you do for yourself but..." Perhaps Will wanted something different, if given the choice.

Will laughs breathlessly and for a moment goes still, just breathing out against Hannibal's chest as he thinks. There are a lot of things he could want, some things he could even get Hannibal to competently help with, but the nervousness that strikes him is like something he would feel with a person, someone he has wanted for a long time and only just now managed to get.

"I want this," he tells him, and it's honest, if not a complete answer, "I want you to mirror, touch me, not worry about hurting me - you won't."

He remembers Hannibal's request to be touched in turn from the night before, remembers feeling a strange tremor skim down his spine at the thought that he could feel it and wanted to remember it. He pulls back and offers a smile.

"If anything else pertinent comes up, we'll work through it."

Hannibal chuckles, gives him another long stroke and says, "I can feel your knees giving out," as if that were the most fascinating thing he'd experienced.

Either in a surrender to practicality or an allowance for Will's trembling muscles, Hannibal shifts to lift him, so that he can rest his weight on the workbench while Hannibal braces one

hand on the table alongside, and begins to work the fastenings of Will's pants with the other.

He is trying not to rush Hannibal, but Will finds his hands in the way, helping with his button, and then stroking his fingers over the back of Hannibal's hand as it curls around his cock, and he finds his voice sliding free again. They don't have time for this, he knows, but he lets it happen anyway, encourages with his touch and his voice, reaching for Hannibal and finding him close.

Hannibal's eyes are open, watching Will's cock slide through his fingers, and then taking in the motion of Will's teeth on his own lower lip, which he soothes with his own mouth, and he knows he has to protect him, somehow. Any way he can, as he's already made up his mind.

Will makes a loud pleased sound against him into the kiss and tucks his legs around Hannibal's hips to pull him closer; knees still spread comfortably but ankles hooked together at the base of Hannibal's spine. He can't roll into the motion easily here, so he allows Hannibal to dictate the pace and rides it out. His hands fumble, seek to find the line of buttons holding Hannibal's shirt closed and start to undo them, splaying his hands over the smooth surface of his chest - still cool - and just touching, letting Hannibal take the sensations in in any way he understands.

He finds Hannibal leaning into the touch, following the motions of Will's fingers, and very quickly learning that the best encouragement is indirect - when Will does something Hannibal decides he likes, he finds Hannibal's clever fingers answering in kind, repeating a motion that has pulled Will's voice from him in the past.

Eventually Will wraps his arms around Hannibal, hooked under his arms and over his shoulders to pull him impossibly closer and adjust his position so his hips sit higher, tailbone rubbing gently against the table with the motion of Will's shifting and Hannibal's hand.

When he breaks the kiss to breathe, Will turns his head, just enough to moan quietly into the otherwise silent apartment. He knows after this he will be sluggish and slow for a long time, tired, sated, sleepy, and he has to commend Hannibal and whatever part of his processes came up with this particular brand of distraction.

If it was calculated, it was masterful. If it wasn't, Will supposes it will only be a matter of time... and then his thoughts start to become too hard to have and he bites his lip and holds on as Hannibal eases back to lighter touches to skirt him along the edge for as long as he can - he never fully relents, but he shifts his touch to just the tips of his fingers over the head of Will's cock, in small coaxing circles that pushes his thumb just under the crown against his frenulum, a motion that's delicate but brightly pleasurable.

The climb is electric this way, unceasing but slow, until Will forgets everything but the sensation and to hold on.

Will curses, voice strained and high, and arches, dropping one hand behind himself to balance, the other near-clawing at Hannibal’s back, careful to keep the skin intact but making his desperation clear. He wonders if he’ll remember, if he’ll stop again thinking Will is in pain when he is in anything but.

But he seems to recall, keeps up the teasing toying until Will is twisting under him and breathless, until he’s coming apart in Hannibal’s clever, unrelenting hands. And Will releases his hold, drops both arms behind himself to balance and bends forwards in a curve, eyes half closed and lips parted on quick shallow breaths. Then he brings his hand up to his face and covers his eyes gently, unsure whether to laugh or cry or forgo both and just drag Hannibal to bed and see how much they can do before Will’s mind reminds him he had a task.

Hannibal is halfway to reaching for him to soothe when Will finds the presence of mind to get hold of his hands and stop a repeat of yesterday's mess. Instead he threads his fingers into Hannibal's and allows that hands are easier to wash as he brushes his lips over the backs of Hannibal's knuckles.

"I'd have to change my shirt again," he tells Hannibal, and the response he gets is low - somewhere near apologetic for the mistake of yesterday, before Hannibal draws back to meet his gaze.

"That would get you into the bedroom," he suggests, before he draws back, and helps Will up onto his feet and off the workbench. Will knows he would not find himself a match for Hannibal's stamina, and the thought of allowing himself to surrender wholly until his body was exhausted and he had no energy to even worry anymore, but instead, he shakes his head.

If he succeeds, they'll have all the time they need.

“You have cleverly distracted me enough.” he tells him, but there is no heat in the words, the opposite perhaps, a softness and longing Will can’t quite mask as easily anymore. He does his pants back up and moves to the kitchen to wash his hands, leaning into Hannibal behind him when he makes one more attempt at coaxing Will away, before surrendering the sink to him.

The next few hours pass quickly, Will far enough in his own mind as he works to not sense time passing at all. It’s only when Hannibal reminds him, gently, one hand heavy on his shoulder, that it’s time for him to eat lunch that Will realizes it’s past 2pm, and a panic sets in under his skin before he can control it and will it away.

He finds his appetite more or less gone, worry filling his stomach and his mind, but eats regardless, slowly, very little, but enough to show enjoyment, to genuinely thank Hannibal and get a very weak smile in answer. When he returns to the workbench, Hannibal follows.

This time, he doesn't distract Will, he settles in his usual chair to wait. His eyes watch Will work attentively, quiet for a while as the most delicate adjustments are made. His presence is steady, almost soothing - it makes this feel a little closer to alright.

"How will you get it to them?" Hannibal asks, quietly. He doesn't have to offer to help, he is always willing, but in this he might hesitate. "How will you offer what you intend to?"

This wasn't a threat to be made - that wouldn't get him anywhere. Except that just the existence of the bomb itself was akin to an ultimatum.

Will sets down the pick he'd been working on to set a catch into place and flexes his fingers. It's intricate, difficult to work and the cut on his hand aches if he holds his palm bent for too long. But he refuses to get Hannibal to help, not when he knows how averse he is to the very idea.

"They can get it themselves," he murmurs, turning to give Hannibal a gentle smile that aims for reassuring and hits where they both feel: between hopeless and terrified. "Pick it up instead of you."

He thinks to the schematics he gave Bev, hopes she found a place to keep them safe. He'd put her in danger giving her the sketches but of all people to keep their head in a struggle she would be the one he'd trust to do it with a smile.

"I won't activate it," he assures him, turning to look at the delicate little structure. It's such a little thing, but could take out a few blocks worth of very important people if set in the right place. "It's just a warning, I'm not going to hurt anyone. That's not the point."

He isn't even sure what the point is. That he can build one? That he can set a target on himself as a dangerous man to watch? Desperation rarely makes friends with logic.

Hannibal doesn't argue that it's likely to only buy them time, if it even does that much. Maybe an hour before they react in the extreme, maybe a week while they debate what the results should be. But even if he were blind, he'd see that the outcome is unlikely to be all roses and light.

It's the compassion that seems to make him understand that Will has to do something. That he cannot sit idle and let it happen any more than he could just give Hannibal up, even if it's just an illusion that he could make a difference he has to try.

So Hannibal sits and waits, keeps him company until he can get the most delicate parts in place, get it to a point where it's stable and he can leave it, before Hannibal gets to his feet to make dinner. He is quiet for once, as he cooks and Will sits back rubbing his tired fingers together, watching Hannibal move comfortably in the space that has always been his.

Will thinks about the old myth that a fish will grow to the size of the bowl in which it is placed, that given a small space they would stay small, and wonders how much bigger Hannibal might be, if he had more of the world than the four walls and the low divider in Will's apartment. He supposes without the protection the small space afforded, it wouldn't matter.

They are worth it to each other, and perhaps only by this set of circumstances. Will eats mechanically, his throat feeling tight and his middle sick, until Hannibal settles his hands on Will's shoulders again and rubs as if to share the weight.

-

He doesn't sleep, though he should be lulled by the slow green-yellow pulse of the charging lights, by the still, cool fingers clutched in his hand and the knowledge that on his workbench

was his best hope. It doesn't feel much like one - Will knows how the news would paint this. How it must seem to anyone outside of this tornado to be such a small thing.

The weight of it is immense.

He gets up, when fidgeting and shifting around does nothing more than twist the covers around and around Will's feet until they're a mess of knotted fabric that provide no cover, and returns to his desk. There's nothing more he can do. He could activate the bomb, that's all that's left to do, but that would do nothing more than panic people, worry Will endlessly that it will go off.

He leaves the desk, wandering aimlessly through the cool dark apartment, hands shaking for want of something to do. Eventually, he returns to bed, climbs over it to the side Hannibal rests against and moves to shift the almost dead weight of the android away from where he's lying. It's a futile endeavour but Will is determined, mind finally set on something to do that won't kill anyone or set Will to hurting himself by accident.

It takes perhaps an hour to move both Hannibal far enough out of the way, and then his own bed closer. A while longer still to pull Hannibal onto it, now that the cord doesn't have to reach quite so far with the bed closer. He adjusts him to lie in a semblance of human comfort, and climbs in opposite him to mirror the position, just watching the way the face lies still and calm in rest. A face he'll miss more than he can possibly tell anyone.

It's very early morning when Will's eyes start to finally droop, double his vision in his exhaustion and stress. He sits up to adjust the settings for Hannibal's start up to be automatic, like an alarm – a feature he hasn't used in years, preferring to always be there when Hannibal 'woke' – for sunup and returns to his curled position of before, resting his hands near Hannibal's until his mind finally switches off and he lets himself sleep.

Hannibal comes up slowly when he does, and Will is vaguely aware of the shifting the android tries to reorient himself, and then the arms curling around him gently, and then he surrenders to drowsing again when Hannibal makes no further effort to rouse him.

In time, he wakes on his own, aware that it is late - nearing midday if not past it, and Hannibal has somehow fought all his intstincts to rise and prepare breakfast, instead staying with Will, still and patient to hold him close. Will blinks himself awake.

"Good afternoon, William," Hannibal greets, sliding slowly into motion as if all it had taken to animate him was Will's gaze. He lifts his hand from Will's shoulder and touches him gently just below his eyes. "You had such dark circles, and no appointments. Did you move the bed by yourself? I would have helped."

"I needed something to do with my hands," Will replies, a poor excuse but at least an honest one. He sighs and closes his eyes again as Hannibal's soft hands retrace the motion before moving to stroke just in front of his ears, on the sensitive skin there.

It's Thursday. One more day before Freddie returns with her sunny smile and hungry eyes, and Will doesn't want to think about the fact that he had slept already half of it away. But it's

true that he has no appointments, true that he has nothing but exhaustion and determination driving him, and he shifts a little closer just to be there before lying still.

He thinks, vaguely, of the fact that dinner will be his last meal, in one way or another today, and realizes he won't be able to keep lunch down is Hannibal insists on making it.

"Should've moved it sooner." he adds quietly, for no reason in particular. There are a lot of things he should have done, some involving Hannibal, others not even touching on him, and Will feels like he should be telling him everything, in a desperate bid, as though he'll be the one taken away and dismantled the next morning, not the android in front of him. Metaphorically, it's true at least. And Will has the capacity to associate and understand his terror like Hannibal can't.

"Then you would have had nothing to do with your hands," Hannibal answers, as if it were that simple. He is calm, as he usually is, but beneath there is some aspect that is strange. Worry, or fear... maybe both. Hannibal smooths his hands over Will's back in a long line, and then rouses himself fully at last, starting to untangle himself to get to his feet so he can see to cooking.

"Do you still feel the need for something to do?" he asks, as he offers his hands to help Will up.

Stretching to his feet, Will looks askance, curious what Hannibal will suggest.

"You can help me make dinner," Hannibal offers. "I'll show you how."

"You're going to let me in the kitchen?" Will asks, amused in spite of himself. "Let me clean up first, then I'll help."

Will is brushing his teeth before he realizes the ploy. It's subtle, but Will realizes Hannibal is offering to teach him how to make the one dish he'd ever asked Hannibal to repeat - to help Will, even if nothing else works out. He is trying to leave a valuable part of himself behind, trying to be sure Will is taken care of.

He spends a long time watching the water swirl down the drain before he shuts it off and leaves the bathroom.

The windows are open in the kitchen when Will returns, and he smiles. "You know I disabled the smoke alarms the last time I attempted to cook," Will reminds him. Hannibal's face melts into an amused smirk.

"I disabled them." he amends, turning with the towel between his hands, drying them, as he raises an eyebrow as though challenging Will to argue. The other doesn't, just laughs and ducks his head in a soft shake before looking up and walking over to join Hannibal in what is essentially his domain, the place he holds utter control.

It's a strange mirror, to allow himself to be directed and encouraged, as Will had always done to Hannibal; like coming full circle. He sighs and gives Hannibal the best smile he can fake.

"I'm all ears."

"Cooking is all memory and timing," Hannibal tells him gently, expecting him to do well but without the idea of any penalty if he doesn't. He is a patient teacher, showing Will to rinse the beef, then dry it, which parts to trim and which to keep.

He sets a heavy dutch oven on the stove, with oil in it to heat, and then helps Will transfer the meat, how to turn it so it can sear properly.

"Don't lean over the onion as you chop it, push the board forward on the counter and chop it away from your body," he suggests, wiping the sting from Will's eyes with a warm, clean kitchen cloth, before he incorporates Will's efforts into the pot as well - and sliced carrots, salt, pepper, bay leaves.

It's slow work, time consuming and it eases Will's mind into it, as he tries to commit to memory Hannibal's easy instruction - wishes for the same grace with the knife and the same internal intuition for when the next step needed to happen. The smells are heavenly, as Hannibal shows him to layer the rice over the simmering meat, and then add the water over the top and let the whole thing go with an entire head of garlic sliced through planted in the middle and left.

By the time they have finished and it can be left to cook the rest of the way out, Will is hungry - and his stomach suggests it will not shy from food. The batch is big, he notices, larger than usual, perhaps because Will had brought home a larger amount of meat than he might have.

"You didn't burn a single thing," Hannibal tells him, and deliberately reaches up to reactivate the smoke alarm in the kitchen.

“Including myself.” Will replies with a smile that is slightly warmer, not resigned by accepting. The preparation was a gentle distraction and one he finds he’s grateful for rather than regretful of. Without thinking much on it, he moves to rest his head against the hollow of Hannibal’s shoulder, just sighing and letting him take his weight for just a moment. He doesn’t pull away when arms settle heavy around him and pull him closer, but he doesn’t return the gesture quite yet.

“Is there something you’ve wanted to do?” he asks after a while, words mumbled against Hannibal but he’s certain they’re heard clearly enough, “Not something your program dictates you to, not something I make you do. Something you feel you want to?”

"I don't want," Hannibal reminds, leaning down to press his cheek alongside Will's temple. "I don't not want. But it was nice to wake up where I did this morning."

Hannibal slides his fingers through Will's hair gently, and Will mirrors the motion and when he peers up, tilting his head, he sees Hannibal closing his eyes into the motion in a mimic of human enjoyment, and supposes he already had his answer. Hannibal doesn't need the sort of things a person does - he can go without touch, without conversation or contact, on and on until he wore out.

But he seeks touch, engages in conversation, welcomes Will's company because those were the things he wanted - now that he had the capacity to want at all. It's as simple as the rest of him. And then Hannibal surprises him with a request. "Can I stay with you again tonight? The whole of it, I mean. I won't keep you awake."

Will’s face lights up for a moment, expression genuine, happy, and he nods.

“I doubt that’ll be a worry,” he tells him. He doesn’t think he’ll sleep, with what’s looming over their heads for the morning. Will pushes the thought away and presses a hand against Hannibal’s chest before extricating himself from the comfortable hold and pulling away.

He takes his time setting the table, leans over the counter and sink to pull the windows closed as the evening settles and brings colder temperatures with it. they don’t talk much throughout, Hannibal content to clean the kitchen until the only sign that anyone had been in it was the delicious smell of the pilaf cooking, Will content to share the space without crowding it with words.

When he finally sits down to eat, he takes his time. Savoring every flavor, closing his eyes to remember them. At one point he finds himself quietly narrating the tastes to Hannibal, describing each as well as he can – knowing he falls short on most – gesturing, laughing at his inability to find the right words, and all the while watching Hannibal take it all in.

It's strange to consider something so human and to know that Hannibal has never had many of the human experiences that define the condition. He has come so far into it with patience and Will's guidance and expectations. Here, he turns them around, smiling as Will laughs.

"I wonder how difficult it would be to simulate taste," Hannibal wonders, briefly amused at the thought of androids eating. "Wasteful, but challenging."

It could be said that they consumed - but it was power and parts that they took in, powering their machinery. Humans weren't so different save that the construction was of a softer nature. He watches Will enjoy his food, and feels satisfied. He is fulfilled - not just by being useful, but by being pleasing.

Hannibal allows Will to help with the dishes, as he had helped with the meal, the rest packed away neatly into the fridge and hopefully - if any of this could possibly work - it would sit there forgotten until Hannibal revived it into another dish entirely. They work to their elbows in soap, and good company, and Hannibal leans ever so slightly against him - just for the contact.

For a while, he can forget. He turns his glass off in the fear that it will ring, and after dinner he fusses with parts and no real aim until Hannibal settles pointedly by the bed, waiting, and the sick feeling of anxiety doesn't ease out of Will's bones even a little when the wave rises up over him. It curls and flexes in his belly, threatening and low, until he's settled on his side, his face pressed against Hannibal's chest in the dark.

"If you get low, get up and plug in," Will tells him, "the cord will reach."

"Alright," Hannibal says, and touches his hair gently, smoothes fingers over Will's face, and after a moment he asks, "What will you do if it doesn't work?"

“Beg?” Will replies, breathing out a quiet laugh that dies quickly. he hasn’t been unrealistic, he has considered the possibility of this not working, more so than the possibility that it would.

“I’ll live,” he says at length, “I’ll spend a few days starving until I remember how to work the stove,” he smiles and feels Hannibal simulate a similar laugh to his gentle one against him, “I’ll botch up eggs, burn toast. Stand on a chair to disable the smoke alarms again.”

He presses closer, eyes closing as he swallows and continues. It hurts, the thoughts invading his mind far too clearly, but letting them out makes them possible, takes the fear of the unknown away enough to be able to breathe without choking.

“Sleep at my desk until my shoulders lock. Then I’ll learn better,” he murmurs, “After a few weeks, I’ll sleep in bed. Wake up early enough to set coffee brewing,” his voice drifts to a soft, constant sound and he can feel Hannibal’s hands explore his back, his hair, his shoulders over and over in gentle motions, “Learn to cook more than just eggs. A few weeks more and I’ll be able to put the smoke alarm back on. By then I’ll be on three meals a day, chopping onions away from my body for dinner. Learn to time things by instinct not by stopwatch…”

Will swallows, shoulders rising in a gentle shrug. “I’ll live.” He repeats, before pulling back just enough to see Hannibal clearly, enough to meet his eyes and wonder if he can understand the gravity of those two words, how hard they are for Will, how distant the very idea is if this doesn’t work.

“But it will work.”

"It will," Hannibal agrees, and he smiles very softly. He pulls Will tight against him, as if to reassure him that he's there, that he will be there. It feels at the same time solid and hollow, like the breaths Hannibal emulates, needless things that are comforting anyway. When Hannibal falls silent, he doesn't stop touching, doesn't stop soothing.

With success... Will's not sure what he'll do. Hannibal is changing, slowly. Partly, as a result of the situation, and partly as a result of his experiences, his ability to attribute meaning to them now. It's alluring now, but it could turn dangerous.

He thinks of how tightly Hannibal's fingers had curled around the tenderizer when Freddie had menaced him, thinks of how he had frozen up on the verge of some motion that he had never completed, running up hard against his own programming of safety. Of his delicacy with Will himself.

Will Graham thinks about Hannibal and how much he has invested in him, and the dividends paid in return and finds his mind drifting at last toward sleep, and Hannibal's touches still enough to let him, when his breathing evens out from the hitches and bumps that had verged and threatened on tears, and he finds himself hollow of worry and full of only his hope that humanity would have to see reason when he handed it to them in a small, android proof package.

He sleeps.

Sometime in the night, Hannibal must weigh all of this - the knowledge of the bomb, the weight of the memories he carries and what they could be used to do to Will, and how willing the man is to tear himself apart to save him. Or perhaps he had already done so sometime earlier.

Will wakes and find that he has not plugged in, that Hannibal is still and unresponsive to the gentle stroke of Will's fingers over his activator, and worry sets in early. The charger indicator reveals a depth of problem when it refuses to show anything but the red of an error when he attaches it.

Hannibal has reached down inside himself and pulled his own killswitch - the emergency failsafe designed to keep an android, at all costs, from hurting a human. He has found, in his own judgment, that what Will was about to do would injure himself - if not physically, then it would do damage invisibly, beneath the surface to his morals and self. Will pries open the service flap and finds the chips ejected, intact, but the circuitry that had held them is dark and damaged. The memory will be wiped, the internals surged and damaged, but Hannibal had tried to protect Will's work.

It’s hard to breathe, so Will doesn’t. Holds the air in his lungs until he chokes on it, until it leaves him fast and he doesn’t fill the void as quickly. and for a long time he struggles, feels the way his throat burns with the promise of tears he’s not shedding, the way his chest aches with the too-quick breaths, the way he still takes in just enough air to remain conscious, not enough to be comfortable.

He keeps himself in Hannibal’s arms, still now, barely warm from where they’ve touched Will and taken the heat in, but he doesn’t sleep. He presses close enough to hurt, to feel the metal skeleton through the skin against his chest, to feel the delicate structures Will had fought so hard to keep safe. He presses his face against Hannibal and whines, a low, loud, anguished sound that tears at his throat as any scream would.

Then he goes still, body shaking, and waits for the sun to force him up.

-

Will winds his hand around the leather lead twice and tugs, issuing another command and smiling when it’s followed. The dog at his feet is young, still stupid but willing to please, and good company. He’d found him wondering the darker parts of the docks, tail between his legs and ears pressed flat. No one had known where he’d come from, and no one seemed to care where he’d go. Will had fed him scraps of toast – half burned, but edible – then soft, sweet-smelling vegetables, then chunks of meat. Then one day, he’d drawn the pup close enough to loop a rope gently around his neck and led him home.

The dog had grounded Will enough to retain a schedule. He needed walking, needed feeding, grew scared during storms and restless in the heat. He was a full time job, and Will found himself easing back into life again, rebuilding the inner workings of Caesars and Napoleons, marvelling at the occasional Alexander that still made its way through his door. He had never asked for an upgrade for the government. He had never touched the bomb prototype again.

Freddie had come as she'd promised, and claimed what was left of Will's android, somewhere between disappointed and proud of what she had considered to be Will's work in disabling the robot so she couldn't get any satisfaction out of it. Even so, he'd stayed strong and quiet only for as long as it had taken her to wheel him out on a flatbed, before collapsing back onto his mattress and refusing to move for what felt like days. He'd woken to find the tail end of the charging cord wrapped around his wrist, and that he was too hungry and too thirsty to keep laying there.

He might have continued to, if not for the intense hunger. Now, he feels quiet inside and he thinks of Hannibal only distantly, only occasionally, his days occupied as they are with work, with long, slow walks about his neighborhood with the dog, and taking care of himself. He supposes, if he had stopped too long to think about it, he might have frozen up as surely as Hannibal used to.

The weather is warm and bright today, spring edging to summer as the dog noses along and procrastinates on peeing to spend a little more time outside, and Will doesn't begrudge him that. When they're inside at last, the dog charging up the stairs because he seems to love them, there are two packages one small space in front of his door. One is huge, as tall as he is and rectangular, and the other small and expertly wrapped in pink paper, a froth of a bow at the top, a card attached in elegant handwriting.

Letting the dog into the apartment, Will takes up the small box and heads inside. The card within reads-

Will-
I don't know if this is a thing that you robot freaks do, it seems kind of morbid, you know? But I had the chance to source this particular batch of recycled scrap metal from reclamation all the way back to its return to use. I thought you might appreciate what turned up.
It's not much, but there's a little bit of metal in hundreds of these that you'd remember the origin of well.
-Freddie.

p.s. your requisition came through. I fudged it a little. The other box is the government's gratitude for your co-operation with their recall.

Will frowns, letting his eyes rest on the ‘government’s gratitude’ before setting the card between the flat of the box base and his fingertips and tugging the bow aside. Within, he finds two things, small, easy to lose and hard to source, and for a moment he wonders how far Freddie’s agenda goes, how much she wants, and who from.

Inside is a circulatory pump and a central processing unit - a heart and a soul.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so, so much for reading this story. Omega Point is a brainchild that demanded to be written, it took us a week, and it is one of - if not the - our most loved stories. And the response for it has been phenomenal, we couldn't be happier. So happy you enjoyed it, so happy you supported us. Thank you for your comments, for your kudos and recommendations.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!